



Sleepwalking in Paradise

A SAN FRANCISCO NOVEL

Andrew O. Dugas

What Others Are Saying About Sleepwalking in Paradise

"That our street folk are angles, mystics, and seers is a secret history of San Francisco. It takes an artist to see it. Behold a novel that lays it out for the rest of us."

-- Gravity Goldberg, Editor, Instant City: A Literary Exploration of San Francisco

"You'll love taking this twisted trip!"

-- Kemble Scott, author of SoMa and The Sower

"It f*cking moved, man! I judge all books based on BART rides, and this was maybe six trips total for me. Perfect!"

-- Matt Stewart, author of The French Revolution

Sleepwalking in Paradise

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For Gis and Ian

The kingdom of the Father is spread upon the Earth and men do not see it.

— The Gospel of Thomas

*Take me down to the paradise city
Where the grass is green
And the girls are pretty
Oh, won't you please take me home*

— Guns N' Roses

Chapter 1

You open your eyes.

The morning sun ignites the clouds and fills the park with golden light, as if the gates of Heaven have burst open. You breathe in and feel the energy dancing all around you. This is the Planet, this is the Moment, this is Home.

If this is a dream, it's unlike any you've ever had. Your dreams are always full of Technicolor images—your twin sons, the jungle, the Rockies. Memories that seem real, but now you feel the same fog-bit air you felt yesterday, smell the same trees and dirt and ocean, your own unwashed self. You hear the same sounds: joggers huffing past the museum, cars braking at the crosswalks, sea gulls screeching over the snack bar dumpster.

You go to the drinking fountain and splash water on your face. The same water as yesterday, the same biting chill, the same metallic taste.

You are not dreaming. This is real. You can see again. Twenty-five years blind, and now you can see again.

Below you lies the sunken plaza, the metal benches arranged before the pink band shell like broken bars of sheet music. The knotty, stunted trees are in full summer green—, and oh, what a green! Never has green looked so green before. The leaves lift and spin in a sudden breeze, all the trees joining together in a synchronized dance. You choke with sudden sobs. So much beauty!

You stagger forward. At the bus stop, you face the glass partition and see your ragged reflection, a quarter century older, hair and beard gone silver. But oh, what a silver! Next to the glass, a tall black-and-white poster shows a man and woman in white pajamas holding flowers. John and Yoko! In the corner, a rainbow apple, the fruit of paradise, is missing a bite. How perfect! You see words and blink until they focus into meaning: *Think Different*.

“I do,” you whisper. “I do!”

Your throat chokes again, but this time with a great laughter that broils up like a mass of air bubbles from the ocean deep. Your surroundings flood in faster than you can name them. Sunlight, cars, eucalyptus trees, little kids scattering

pigeons, the colossal orange tower on the hill, antennae penetrating the golden clouds and diamond sky.

Everything so beautiful in its perfection. Each little part. All of it together.

You laugh until your sides ache and hot tears bite your cheeks.

The Man in the Park has done more than restore your eyesight. He has given you *vision!* Paradise unfolds in every direction, revealing perfection in every crack, beauty in every blemish. A flock of starlings darts up and dances all around you, as if to rejoice in your awakening.

You remember what the Man in the Park told you, your assignment, so you drop onto a bench and close your eyes and wait for the And there it is. The Tug.

You must go find Tommy.

When you open your eyes, you see a wall of people, keeping a safe distance from the laughing and crying street crazy. Hard as they stare, they do not see you. But you can see them all right, see the peppermint swirl of their fear and curiosity.

Directly before you, a cop squats on one knee, his cap on the blonde dirt ground. He looks into your eyes and says your name over and over, gently, almost whispering, each iteration the same sound, but a different question.

“Johnnny?” Are you okay?

“Johnnny?” Is it really you, Blind Johnny Ray?

Johnnny? Johnnny? Johnnny?

He knows you. He’s a friend, never mind the badge.

The Tug urges you to your feet, and you go with him.

Chapter 2

Tommy Delacroix hesitated outside his boss's office.

The alluring smell of toasted bagels drifted from the employee kitchen down the hall. Hunger stabbed at Tommy's belly. Today was Friday, Bagel Day in the Corpcom department at TransData MetaSystems, and Tommy had skipped breakfast in anticipation of a crisp garlic bagel slathered with salmon cream cheese.

He'd be shit out of luck if this little meeting ran long. Why a megacorporation like TDM didn't just pony up for an extra dozen or two was beyond him. Would the shareholders protest?

A web developer loped toward Tommy, plate in hand. Two bagel halves, thick with white gobs of whipped cream cheese, stared up at Tommy like googly eyes.

“Dude! You’d better hurry! They’re going fast!”

Tommy smiled. Everyone was “Dude” to the young developers. They all looked nineteen and made Tommy, at thirty-five, feel like Grandpa Delacroix.

“Tell me about it. I’ve got a meeting with Claude first.” Tommy hooked his fingers into quotation marks. “Urgent business.”

“Too bad, dude. Gonna get stuck with salted.” He shrugged, then leaned in. “Hey, did you hear the latest Monica Lewinsky joke?”

“Which one?”

“Why’s Monica Lewinsky voting Republican in 2000?”

Tommy had heard the joke, but played along. “I don’t know. Why?”

“The Democrats left a bad taste in her mouth.” The web developer guffawed. “Get it? Bad taste? In her mouth?”

Tommy laughed. “Bad taste, got it. Good one. You should email that to Gail up in HR.”

“Dude!” His young colleague shook his blonde mop and went on his way.

Tommy returned his focus to Claude’s door. He peered through the adjacent glass panel and rapped his knuckle against the frame.

Without looking up or missing a beat in his typing, Claude waved him in.

“Give me just one sec to finish this email.” Claude tilted his head, looking over his reading glasses. He looked like Ben Franklin and typed with the tip of his tongue sticking out.

Tommy slipped in and glanced around like an awkward first guest at a cocktail party. Framed posters from previous marketing campaigns brightened the walls, and a banjo leaned in the corner. Not that Tommy had ever seen him play it. Like everything else about Claude, it was for effect, presentation.

Outside the window, a low nicotine haze hung over the cars crowding Highway 101. The sun burned down from an unbroken blue sky. Another scorcher in Silicon Valley.

As Tommy settled into a chair, the usual unease came over him. Every time he went into a meeting and heard that door click shut, he knew the jig was up. Any second, restraints would pop out and bind his wrists to the chair. People in dark suits, including a blonde with thick red lipstick, would emerge from the shadows and surround him.

Yes, they’d tell him, he’d finally been found out for the fraud that he was. They’d discovered that he did not belong there, that he was not One of Them. How long had Tommy thought he could fool them?

He pictured Claude leafing through a leather-bound portfolio, Tommy’s permanent record. Sure, Tommy’s credentials—the affluent suburb of his youth, the good state college, his experience as a professional journalist—looked good on the surface. Closer examination, however, had revealed the pie-throwing anarchism, the Labor Days spent feeding the homeless in Golden Gate Park, and most disturbingly of all, the editorial tirades against globalization and multinational corporations.

Tommy would have to be killed, not only as punishment but to cover up their mistake of hiring him in the first place. A win-win solution. Claude would explain, in his best sensitive-boss voice, that while he personally regretted this decision, it was just company policy.

“There!” Claude finished typing and closed his laptop like the hood of a small car. He beamed up at Tommy and straightened the pens and papers on his desk. “Before we start, Tom, let me say again, good job on completing the Web site copy ahead of deadline. Nigel really liked the piece on Y2K preparedness.”

Tommy adjusted the cuffs of his blue Oxford shirt. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“I mean it, too. You’re making the whole department look good.”

“Well, if Nigel’s happy, then I’m happy.” Nigel was the Corpcom VP and not someone you wanted to make unhappy. Ever.

“That’s the attitude!” Claude brought his hands together as if about to pray. “A bit of a situation has come up and we need to get right on it.”

Tommy’s stomach growled. He leaned forward to cover it up. “Sure, whatever you need.”

“Your plate’s pretty clean, right?”

“I still need to revise and upload Phil’s white paper to the Web site. He’s making some last- minute technical revisions, but I should have it back this afternoon.” Tommy shrugged. After the stress of the past couple of weeks, he’d been hoping for some slack days. “So what’s up?”

Claude leaned back and fiddled with the buttons on his cardigan. “How’s everything else going?”

“Everything else?”

“You know. Carlotta. The house hunting.” Carlotta was Tommy’s fiancée. She’d worked with Claude at another company and had helped Tommy get the interview at TDM. “Everything else.”

Tommy hated it when Claude played Buddy Boss, hated having to play along. Before he could respond, his cell phone chimed in his pants pocket. “Oops! That’s probably Carlotta now.” Tommy pressed and poked the phone through the fabric until the noise stopped. “There we go. She’s fine.”

“Still the yoga fanatic?”

Tommy shifted in his seat. “Sure, every day. About the house hunting, well, we’re still saving for the down payment. Still going to open houses, of course.”

“Well, I hear they have all these special programs now. Lower down payment, sometimes nothing down at all.”

“Carlotta said something about that.” If Claude had something to say, Tommy wished he would just get down to it.

“Anyway, Tom.” Claude picked up and bit into a bagel half smeared white with cream cheese. “If we can get the conversation back on track.”

“Right. The situation.”

“Yes. There’s an emergency CommStaff meeting this afternoon.” Claude’s hands came together again. CommStaff meant Nigel, Claude, and Tatanisha, his assistant, plus folks from Legal. “I want you to be there. Your background in journalism may prove useful.”

Tommy suppressed a smirk. Background in journalism! As if *The Weekly Watch Dog*, aka *The Dog*—, an arts and entertainment rag comprised of local lefty politics and erotic personal ads—, existed on the same plane as *The New York Times*.

His suppressed smirk gave way to a suppressed smile. Those had been good years.

“Great. How can I help?”

Claude toyed with his glasses, opening and closing the temples. “I don’t know how well you follow the news, but do you remember that conflict in Africa last year? In Bwanku?”

Conflict? Tommy wondered if he meant the genocide.

“You mean, B’Winki?” Tommy offered. Depending on the source, somewhere between a half million to two million people had been killed. Mostly members of a minority tribe.

“B’Winki! That’s the place!” Claude took another bite of his bagel.

“Well, okay.” Tommy brushed a wrinkle out of his khakis. “But what does that have to do with TDM?”

Claude laughed. “I know, it sounds crazy, but some activist organizations are intent on publicizing the fact the government used Concentrica to identify members of the opposition.” Concentrica was TDM’s flagship database product.

Tommy’s gut sank, like he was in an elevator dropping out of control.

“Huh. Is that right?”

Tommy told himself, again, all the things he’d told himself when he’d first taken this job. That databases don’t kill people; guns and cruise missiles kill people. That just because Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* on a typewriter, the Underwood Company wasn’t responsible for the Holocaust. He told himself that TDM databases were used by nonprofits and international aid organizations and environmental groups, too.

The elevator feeling didn’t go away.

“Crazy, isn’t it?” Claude said.

“Yes. Crazy.” Tommy offered his Hitler and typewriter analogy, taking care to reference World War II instead of the Holocaust.

Claude’s head bobbed and weaved, nodding Yes and shaking No at the same time.

“Um, kind of. But it’s not that simple.” He raised his hands in theatrical exasperation. “It never is when politics get mixed in, right? Just being associated with the government in, uh. . . over there makes us look bad.”

“Right. Guilt by association. But what about all the other organizations that use Concentrica for. . . for. . . the forces of good?” Did Tommy just say that? Did those words actually come out of his own mouth? Forces of good?”

“Exactly!” Claude sprang forward in his chair. “See, I knew you’d get it. I like the way you’re thinking. It’s good, but you know, a crisis of this magnitude is beyond our humble resources. We’re talking to some big-gun PR firms already. We just need to batten down the hatches until the cavalry comes over the hill. But no matter who we hire, I want you to ride shotgun on the messaging. Make sure it’s got our style.”

Tommy nodded. “Sure, Claude. You can count on me.”

“This thing’s going to break over the weekend. Probably Monday morning at the top of the news cycle. I’d like you to draft a quick, preemptive press release before the meeting. Let’s go in there with something. Something to the effect that we’re shocked, we’re launching an investigation. And I like your idea about playing up our forces-of-good customers.”

“Right.”

“See if you can’t get it to Tatanisha at least half an hour before the meeting.”

“Half an hour. Right.” Tommy wanted to get up and out of there. The knot of hunger was tightening.

“And Tom, one more thing.” Claude set the remaining chunk of bagel on a small paper plate and wiped his fingers with a napkin. “Let’s try to avoid any comparisons to Hitler and the Third Reich.”

Tommy smiled, not sure if he was joking. “Of course.”

“Great. I’m glad we’re on the same page.” He opened his laptop, indicating that their little meeting was over.

Tommy stood. His stomach growled. “Great, I’ll see you later.”

“Tom! One second.” Claude leaned forward with a coy smile. Back in Buddy Boss mode. “Did you hear that Monica Lewinsky is voting Republican in the 2000 Election?”

Tommy fought to keep the smile on his face.

Chapter 3

Of the once bountiful offering of bagels, only a blackened beach of crumbs, bits of baked onion and garlic, and random seeds remained on the break room counter. Save for a translucent white film, the plastic tubs of cream cheese spreads had been scoured clean. A small container of butter sat among the ruins, turning a darker yellow.

Tommy shook the brown paper sacks from the bagel shop. They were light as balloons.

Then he saw it. The butt half of a poppy seed bagel lay in the shadow of the toaster, partially hidden by a napkin. He blinked in disbelief. The tension in his belly softened.

He popped the bagel half into the toaster and leaned against the counter. His mind turned to the press release, putting together the outline.

His cell chimed. Carlotta. He flipped it open.

“Hey, sweetie.”

A barking laugh. “Sweetie? Why, Tommy, I had no idea you felt that way.”

Tommy flushed. It was Carrie, his editor from *The Dog*.

“Hey, believe it or not, I was just thinking about you.”

“Really? Well, get your hand out of your pants and listen up.” More barking laughter.

Hearing her voice felt good, better than Tommy would have expected. “Carrie, Carrie, Carrie. It’s been a long time.”

The toaster dinged. The half bagel popped up, barely warmed over. Tommy pressed the lever down again and maxed up the heat knob.

“Tommy, Tommy, Tommy. Still working for the Man, you sellout?”

“You betcha. Sure beats working for *The Dog*!”

Carrie groaned. “That joke still isn’t funny. I don’t know why you keep trying. How’s that slut, Carlotta?”

“We’re still engaged. How’s that bull dyke, Renee?”

“Getting ready for the bar exam, and it’s a good thing, too.” Her voice shifted lower. “She might have to support me for a while. Things are changing around here. It’s only a matter of time before they fire us all.”

A few months earlier, *The Dog*’s founder, Bryce Cavanaugh, had sold the paper to a big alternative-media conglomerate that was on the march, swallowing up arts-and-entertainment weeklies across the Southwest and California.

“Don’t sweat it. I’m sure CNN will take you back.”

Carrie chuckled. “Yeah, I’m sure Ted Turner is just waiting for my resume to cross his desk.”

“Uh-huh. So what’s up? To what do I owe the honor of the phone call?”

“What? You think I need a favor or something?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Since he’d left, Carrie had sometimes tapped him for the occasional film review or editorial brush-up, paying him with comps—coupons taken in exchange for advertising—from Bryce’s Magic Drawer.

“I know the paper has gone into the editorial toilet since you left—I mean, just look at it—but no, that’s not why I called. And besides, most of our core content comes from HQ in Phoenix. So don’t worry, Shakespeare, we’re managing just fine without you.”

Tommy sniffed the tub of suspect butter. “My, my. Sounds like someone got up on the wrong side of the menstrual cycle.”

“Good one, Tommy. I forgot you had a sensitive side. Actually, this is just a courtesy call to pass along a message. Someone was trying to reach you here.”

“Really? Friend or foe?”

“The cops, actually. A certain Sergeant Guardino. San Francisco Po-leece.”

“You don’t say.” That couldn’t be good. Tommy wondered if it had anything to do with Pies Not Bombs. But all that had been years before.

The toaster rang and out flew the bagel half, charred and smoking, onto the counter.

“Shit!” Tommy steered it onto a plate, his fingers smarting.

“Everything under control over there?” Carrie asked.

“Yeah, yeah.” Tommy blew on his fingertips. “Did he say what it was about?”

“The cop? Yeah, he did. He said to tell you that they’re onto you. They identified you from security footage from that pie-throwing incident in ‘96, and you are so

busted.”

Tommy almost believed her. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ha! You flinched! Admit it!”

“That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it. Now why did he really call?”

“Something about a homeless guy. He wants to know if you can go pick him up.”

“Pick up? As in, bail out? What homeless guy? Did he mention any names?”

“Jimmy something. Jimmy Row? I don’t know.”

“That’s a Grateful Dead song, Carrie.”

Then it registered and Tommy saw him: a tall, lean mountain man with a bright smile and a silver beard. The image was so strong, Tommy felt like he was right there in the break room.

“Blind Johnny Ray?”

“That’s it! Johnny Ray. Anyway, can you call this cop back? He left his cell number.”

Tommy wrote down the number. After all these years, Johnny had resurfaced. Tommy didn’t know what to think and hoped that his old friend wasn’t in too much trouble. “Wow, I can’t believe it.”

“Who is he?”

“This homeless guy I used to know in Cole Valley. Back in the day.”

“That’s great, Dr. Schweitzer.” Carrie chuckled. “Speaking of pie-throwing, any chance you’d be interested in doing an editorial? For old times’ sake?”

“Ha! I thought you didn’t need any favors.”

“I’d be the one doing you the favor. One last parting shot at Charles Claibourne.” Claibourne was a notorious San Francisco fixer and broker of backroom deals, and had been a frequent target of Tommy’s more vitriolic editorials.

“Oh?”

“Did you see *The Chron* this morning?”

“No, why?”

“The Stoneflag Project hit a major snag. Golden opportunity for some good old-fashioned schadenfreude.”

The Stoneflag Project was the latest in a wave of high-rise construction projects that was remaking the South of Market district. Once the low-rent home to edgy night clubs, warehouse-dwelling artists, and light industry, “SoMa” had become the hippest ZIP code for high-tech startups and loft-dwelling poseurs, a cachet that developers like Stoneflag were eager to cash in on.

“I’m listening.”

“Second day of excavation and the back hoe churns up an old Native American shell mound.”

“So?”

“So the University of California filed an injunction until their archeologists can get in there and do it right.”

“Sweet!” For a moment, Tommy was transported back to a very special press conference.

“So Interested? Three hundred words. I can run it next week.”

Tommy was tempted, but found out that he really didn’t care anymore. “No, sorry. I’ve been out of the loop too long, though I do appreciate the opportunity.”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind.”

“Will do. Could this shell mound thing kill the project?”

“We can dream, Tommy, but let’s face it. The SoMa we once knew and loved is dead.”

Tommy and Carrie chatted for a few more minutes, reluctant to end the call. He asked about old co-workers and was surprised to learn how many had already been pushed out. The most recent crop of interns was comprised of career-focused dweebs who couldn’t drink more than two pints of beer without puking in the alley.

Tommy tossed the burnt bagel into the garbage.

Chapter 4

The pie incident that Carrie never failed to mention had been Tommy's farewell performance for Pies Not Bombs, a Food Not Bombs splinter group that believed that nothing decried a public figure's crimes against humanity better than a banana cream pie right in the kisser.

In this case, Pies Not Bombs asked Tommy to use his press credentials to sneak a co-conspirator, disguised as a photographer, into the Stoneflag Project press conference. Tommy had been reluctant—his *Dog* days were ending and the TDM gig was on the horizon—but when he learned that Charles Claibourne was the target, he couldn't say no. Tommy wanted a front row seat when the co-conspirator opened his camera bag, pulled out the pie, and smashed it into Claibourne's face.

That had been the plan anyway.

The pie was payback for the Temple Hotel, a rundown SRO in the Tenderloin, a nasty inner-city neighborhood wedged between the shopping glitz of Union Square and the Greco-Roman glory of the Civic Center. The location hadn't bothered the private consortium that bought the hotel. With Claibourne & Associates running point, they pushed through a quick rezoning that allowed them to evict all the residents, mostly low-income or disabled or both. The new owners renovated the place, basement to roof, and filled it with foreign grad students who didn't know the Tenderloin from Nob Hill. About half of the old residents were relocated through public services. The rest wound up on the streets.

Of course, Claibourne's crimes against humanity hadn't begun with the Temple Hotel. In fact, they hadn't even begun with Charles Claibourne. Dig deep enough into any nefarious deal in San Francisco history and the Claibourne name bubbled up like swamp gas. The great patriarch, Basil Claibourne, founded the dynasty by cornering the lumber market during the Gold Rush boom years, and not by asking politely. (Local lore held that his favorite negotiating tactic involved a hammer and his adversary's fingers.) For over a century, the city's fortunes were driven by Claibourne lawyers and Claibourne judges and

Claibourne senators and Claibourne congressmen, their influence as inseparable from the city as the fog.

In that context, the Temple Hotel was small potatoes. Chump change. A trifle. But for Tommy and Pies Not Bombs, it would do. It would do just fine.

Security barely glanced at Tommy's press tags. Inside, the fake photographer cut left and Tommy cut right, his attention returning to his otherwise legitimate journalistic charge. First priority was the media table, where three spokesmodels in push-up bras were handing out press packets and free bottles of mineral water.

According to the packet, the Stoneflag Tower would rise thirty-three stories above SoMa, offering a south-facing plaza plus two levels of shops, eateries, and health clubs. Photoshopped images showed ethnically-diverse urbanites dining al fresco, pushing strollers, and gazing into shop windows. Another yuppie fantasy. The cover and centerfold featured full-page aerial shots of downtown San Francisco with the new tower air-brushed in.

The music faded and one of the mayor's assistants stepped up to the podium. Tommy edged his way to the front. The mayor, impeccably dapper in his trademark black suit and pearl stickpin, stood next to Stoneflag CEO Bradley Washburn, who had the tanned good looks of a retired golf pro. The two chatted like fathers at a wedding.

Then Tommy spotted Claibourne. The man cleaved to the background, as always, avoiding the spotlight. There was nothing distinctive about his appearance. Mid-thirties, neither short nor tall and dressed in a conservative dark suit, Claibourne's sole distinguishing feature was a beard trimmed so closely that it was more stubble than fur, more shadow than substance.

A strange quiet overcame Tommy. Here was the man he'd ripped apart in dozens of City Watch columns. This inconsequential little man, this suit, was the Great Malefactor? Tommy had half-expected horns and a tail.

The mayor strode to the podium amid great applause and a lightning storm of flashbulbs. He somehow managed to simultaneously quiet the crowd and wring out the last drop of cheering.

"I just want to say how proud I am to be spearheading this renewal of the downtown waterfront and the South of Market district, our beloved SoMa. For too many decades, these areas have been sorely neglected."

The mayor proceeded to credit his administration with everything Right and Good in San Francisco short of sourdough bread and the temperate climate.

Tommy saw his co-conspirator at the far end of the dais. The idiot wasn't even pretending to take photos. But he had edged to within a few feet of Claibourne, who now stood with arms crossed and lips pursed, listening intently to Jack Garfield, the mayor's former campaign director.

The mayor wrapped up. ". . . and I'm proud to say, a brand new waterfront stadium for our very own San Francisco Giants baseball team!"

Applause exploded. The mayor turned the podium over to the Stoneflag CEO, then joined Claibourne and Garfield. They all shook hands, and Claibourne said something that made the mayor smile.

Tommy's co-conspirator knelt down and unzipped the side of his camera bag. Tommy's heart quickened as the faux photographer drew out the banana cream pie from the special compartment. With remarkable grace, he stood and wound up like a pitcher on the mound.

"Sic semper assholus!"

He lunged toward Claibourne, but his foot snagged on a television cable. The trajectory shifted and the pie slammed dead center in the mayor's face. Bull's-eye, even if it was the wrong bull. Police swarmed the thrower. The mayor stood in white-faced shock, arms akimbo and slabs of crust smearing down his chest.

Garfield's chest was splattered with pie shrapnel, but Claibourne was untouched, save for a single blob of filling that clung to his lapel like a large beetle. He plucked it away with a swipe of his little finger. He tasted it, then nodded.

"Not bad," Tommy heard him say. "But I've had better."

Chapter 5

Marta Sandoval listened to Mr. Claibourne's teleconference with the Stoneflag people, her headset on so she could take notes. Then her own cell phone chirped, the window lighting up with MAMA in bold letters. Marta checked the time; she had to be calling from the hospital.

Marta told herself that the news wasn't bad, that Isabel and the baby were okay. The teleconference was critical; Marta would call her mother back in a few minutes. She pressed Ignore and returned her focus to the conference. The lawyers were still correcting the executives, the executives still pressing the lawyers to be less exacting.

For the most part, Mr. Claibourne was silent, listening and absorbing. But when he did speak, Marta could not help but hear his father in his voice. He spoke with the same confidence, the same insistent calm, the same cadence and measure of professional comfort. Marta could easily imagine that Mr. Claibourne Senior, the man who had hired her twenty years before, was still sitting on the other side of the large oak doors.

"Are the tribal leaders acting directly or through an official organization?"

"I agree. A shell mound is a garbage dump and a garbage dump is a garbage dump, but they'll play the heritage card as long as they can. . ."

"That's okay. We can play the heritage card, too."

Marta couldn't believe the Stoneflag people were being so hard on Mr. Claibourne. They spoke to him as if he had personally hidden the shell mound underneath the construction site! Was it his fault the University of California wanted to close the site while they performed a proper archaeological dig?

Were it not for Mr. Claibourne's efforts, ground would never have been broken. Had he not crushed the neighborhood groups who'd opposed the project? Had he not created from thin air a brand new front group to advocate for Stoneflag?

"Trust me, Bradley. I know exactly what we need to do. We have a lot of options, a lot of angles we can work here."

Marta's phone chirped again. Mama. She told herself that the teleconference was as good as over, that she could duck out.

“Mama?”

“Marta.” Mama’s voice was scratchy and high.

“Mama, what did the doctor say?” Marta should’ve taken Isabel herself. Mama was too timid around professionals, especially doctors. What did it mean that the call couldn’t wait until after the consultation?

That morning, Marta’s baby sister, Isabel, pregnant for the first time, had awoken to damp underwear and damp sheets.

“Marta, please. Talk to the doctor.”

Dr. Spungen’s familiar gravelly voice came on the line. “Hello, Marta. First, Isabel is fine, no worries there.”

And the baby? She wondered. Marta’s right hand clutched at an invisible cross around her neck. With no children of her own, Marta’s nephews and nieces were everything.

“You understand that part of labor is the amniotic sac breaking and the water exiting through the birth canal? That is, her water breaking—”

“But she is only seven months! Is she—”

Dr. Spungen, calm as ever, cut her off. “Marta, Marta, it’s okay. Her water hasn’t broken yet. Technically.” The word hung in the void like a thunderclap.

“Doctor, please.”

The line fell silent. Marta pictured Dr. Spungen stepping away from her mother and sister so he could speak directly and without evasions.

“Marta, your sister’s amniotic sac is leaking. We’re not sure why or where. The ultrasound indicates a possible tear near the top. It’s not entirely uncommon, although we usually see this sort of thing later, closer to term.”

The line fell silent long enough for Marta to think the call had dropped. Then:

“I won’t kid you, Marta. If the leak doesn’t close on its own, there is some risk of infection. In which case, we’d have to induce labor.”

Marta counted out three long, deep breaths. “When will you know?”

“Just make sure she gets plenty of sleep over the weekend. Total bed rest, feet up. Above all, keep her reassured and calm. Next week, we’ll take another look.”

“Okay.” Marta mentally listed out what she and her mother and Lupe, her other sister, would have to do. Lots of tea and television. Isabel was an energetic girl who liked roughhousing with her nephews, Lupe’s boys. They lived right

upstairs, so it might be hard to keep the boys from running in and jumping on the bed. All three sisters and their mother lived together in the same three-unit building that Marta had bought years before. Marta occupied the cottage out back, where she could watch the boys play in the safety of the courtyard.

“Doctor, what’s the worst-case scenario?”

“Now, Marta, I can’t speculate—”

“Doctor Spungen, you know you’re not getting off this phone until you tell me everything!” The sharpness in her own voice surprised Marta. She was glad Mr. Claibourne liked to keep his office door closed. “How bad?”

Silence. Hesitation.

“Marta, let me put it this way. If she goes into labor now, we’re looking at a premature birth. Almost certainly via Cesarean. It’s not optimal, but it’s not the end of the world, either. We see it every day.”

“Is that dangerous for the baby?”

“Dangerous is a relative term. Of course, that scenario opens the door to a greater number of less desirable outcomes. We need to weigh that danger against the danger of an infection. The danger to Isabel.”

Marta felt herself flush. “Of course, I didn’t mean to suggest. . . I share your concern. Of course, you’re right.” Marta swallowed back a black fear she couldn’t name. Something was very wrong, but what?

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. This tear could close on its own, in which case there’d be no reason she couldn’t carry to term. Every hour that little Lazlo stays in the womb, the better for both of them.”

When the doctor said the baby’s name, Marta remembered the night two weeks before when Isabel had made the big announcement. For months, she’d been bouncing between Lazlo, after their maternal grandfather, and Diego, after the baby’s father, who was currently stationed in South Korea.

“Is that your final answer?” Lupe asked, making the whole table laugh.

Once named, Lazlo had ceased to be an abstraction and became a member of the family. Everyone spoke about him as if he had always existed and was momentarily absent, like his father.

I bought a new blanket for Lazlo.

When Lazlo comes, we must take him to the zoo.

Do you think Lazlo will play baseball with us?

And now Dr. Spungen was calling him Lazlo, too.

Three more deep breaths. “Thank you, Doctor. I’ll make sure she gets plenty of rest this weekend, even if I have to stand over her with a belt! Don’t worry.”

She pressed the End button on her cell, then looked over. Mr. Claibourne was standing in the doorway to his office. His white shirt and charcoal gray pants were perfectly pressed and creased, his snakeskin suspenders polished like glass. His dark features looked all the darker from his closely trimmed beard.

“Can we get started?” He turned and walked back into his office without waiting for a response.

Chapter 6

Tommy ducked into an empty conference room and opened his cell phone. He punched in the number from Carrie. It rang twice.

“Guardino.”

Tommy cleared his throat. “Yes, Officer Guardino, I—”

“Sergeant Guardino.”

“Yes. Sorry. Hi. I’m Thomas Delacroix. I got a message you were looking for me. Something about Blind Johnny Ray?”

“One minute, please.” The line went quiet.

Tommy wondered about Johnny. He wasn’t the kind to get into trouble. Even then, his magnificent charm usually got him out. If he needed bail, Tommy was in no position to help. He and Carlotta were saving every extra dollar toward a down payment.

“Mr. Delacroix?”

“Yes, hello.” Tommy sat on the edge of the round conference table, his stomach in a knot. “What happened? Is Blind Johnny all right?”

“If you mean Mr. John Raymond Watters, yes, he’s just fine. I picked him up at about six-thirty this morning near the band shell in Golden Gate Park. He was making quite a commotion.”

Tommy checked the time. It was barely nine-thirty, way too soon for bail. The wheels of injustice simply did not turn that quickly. “Okay, okay. Right. So why is he being held? What are the exact charges against him?” Tommy felt a bit of the old activist bile rising in his throat. Damned cops thought they could just muscle people off the streets.

The sergeant’s voice remained steady, that professional tone cops use whether they’re asking you to move along or cuffing your wrists. “Take it easy, Mr. Delacroix. He’s not under arrest. Johnny was scaring the tourists, and I just happened to be on the scene.”

The cop paused. His tone shifted.

“Considering the circumstances, I thought it might be best to release him to someone more responsible.”

Tommy didn’t understand. “Considering what circumstances?”

“Well, he is quite . . . agitated.”

Tommy had never seen Johnny even remotely agitated. But then how well did he really know the man? Johnny was just a bum he used to help out now and then with leftovers and spare change. Wasn’t he?

“And by agitated, I mean. . . Well, perhaps exuberant would be a better word.”

Exuberant. Aha. Johnny was high on something. Maybe a generous dose of X or acid. But nothing that made him dangerous or unpredictable, like PCP or meth, and Guardino didn’t want to bust him. That would mean a trip to SF General and three days of observation in scratchy pajamas and nasty meds.

Tommy regretted judging Guardino too harshly. Maybe he was one of the good ones.

“I think I understand, Sergeant. Would this be the sort of exuberance that wears off after seven or eight hours?”

“No, Mr. Delacroix. I’m not talking about that sort of exuberance.” The cop paused. “May I ask how well you know Johnny Ray?”

“That’s hard to say. I used to live in Cole Valley, and he was one of the neighborhood homeless guys.” Tommy sighed. “I haven’t actually seen him in years. Did he say why he told you to call me?”

“But he was blind, right? You even called him ‘Blind Johnny’ before.”

“Sure.” Tommy thought about the few occasions when he’d seen Johnny’s ravaged eyes. One time, he’d let Johnny use his shower. Johnny peeled off his sunglasses and handed them to Tommy. Tommy shivered at the memory. “Trust me, the man is blind. His eyes got fried when he was in the Army. Vietnam.”

Guardino’s sigh came through as white noise. “I’d heard it was something like that. I just wanted to be sure.”

“Is he all right, Sergeant?” The press release nagged at him. Hunger squeezed his stomach. “If so, is it really absolutely necessary for me to come all the way up to the city? I’m way down here in Redwood Shores. I’m on a deadline, and I have to question if exuberance counts as an emergency.”

“Maybe not an emergency, Mr. Delacroix, but you’d be exuberant, too, if you suddenly weren’t blind anymore.”

Tommy leaned over the half-wall of Tatanisha's cubicle.

"What do you want, Tommy?" Tall and thin with a nearly shaved head, Tatanisha spoke in a hybrid Afro-British accent, every syllable concise and clipped. "Some of us are very busy, you know."

"Right. Listen, can you cover for me for a couple of hours? I have a personal matter I need to attend to." Tommy used the same expression—a personal matter—that he'd heard coworkers use when they needed to go to the airport or retrieve a sick child from daycare. That was how Tommy got by in the corporate world: monkey see, monkey do.

Tatanisha's eyes went wide. "Personal matter? Now? Are you mad? Don't you have a press release to write?"

"It's mostly done. I'll be back in plenty of time. The meeting's not until three, right?"

"Mostly done, I'm sure." She saw right through him. She always did. But she'd also seen him pull enough rabbits from enough hats to know that he'd deliver. "You really think you can be ready? Claude will want to review it first."

"Let me worry about Claude."

She shook her head and gazed across the folders and stacks choking her desk. "I really cannot believe this! I have to put together all these packets, but you have time for errands!"

"I just have to run up to the city real quick."

"What for? What's so important?"

"It's a personal matter. As in personal?" Why was she being so difficult?

She turned back to her computer. "Personal matter, I'm sure. Go, but don't expect me to lie if Claude comes looking for you."

She said something else, but Tommy was already jogging toward the elevators.

Chapter 7

Marta gathered her laptop, steno pad, and pens, and followed after Mr. Claibourne.

Marta always liked coming into this space, a corner office furnished with oriental rugs and paneled with honey golden wood that seemed to absorb and hold the light all day.

The L-shaped room was a harmonious union of contradictions. One wing was all business with a sleek conference table with leather chairs, and a dropdown screen and the latest projection equipment. The other wing, however, was furnished like a hotel lounge from the Forties, with dark leather sofas and armchairs flanked by coffee and end tables. The paneled walls even concealed a full wet bar, even though it hadn't been opened since Mr. Claibourne Senior's retirement ten years before for health reasons.

Two very different spaces, yet somehow one space. Maybe it was the wood and leather and rugs that bound them together.

Mr. Claibourne was already seated at his desk, the same desk his father had used before him and which faced the room at a perfect diagonal from the corner. Indeed, when Mr. Claibourne took over, he'd changed nothing. Not the furniture. Not the framed original illustrations and maps of San Francisco. And certainly not the formality of addressing each other as Mr. Claibourne and Ms. Sandoval.

Almost nothing. He did remove the antique glass-domed stock ticker from the corner behind the desk. ("I always hated this thing," Marta heard him say as he dragged it away.) In its place he had installed a large potted ficus whose leaves and branches had, in the ten years since, grown into a massive gray-green cloud looming behind his desk chair.

This morning, the tree was bright emerald in the sunlight streaming through the Bush Street windows. That corner always had good light; Marta could still remember how the light used to strike the brass workings of the stock ticker.

Mr. Claibourne was writing out a list on a legal pad. "Before we get going, any messages?" He didn't look up.

Marta took her usual seat and set her materials on the corner of his desk. She flipped open her steno pad and uncapped her pen.

“Walgreen’s called. Your prescription’s ready.”

“Okay. Next.”

“Mr. Garfield called. They might move up the announcement of the mayor’s candidacy to the first of the month. He wants to know if everyone can be on board that soon?”

The mayor was planning a run for the Senate in 2000. Though widely anticipated by the press and public alike, no official announcement had been made. Mr. Claibourne’s task was to line up endorsements and donations from corporations and political groups in San Francisco, Silicon Valley, Sacramento, and everywhere in between.

This active campaigning concerned Marta. Mr. Claibourne Senior had insisted on neutrality in all things political. *We don’t need to take sides*, he used to say. *No matter who wins, they’ll always be ready to sit at the table.*

Mr. Claibourne Junior made a face. “That’s three weeks ahead of schedule. Tell him it’s not a problem.” Of course it wasn’t; the endorsements and donations had been lined up weeks before. “Add a special handling charge to our fee. Five percent?”

Marta nodded.

“Good. Next.”

“The dotcom dinner is confirmed for next Wednesday, 7:30 at Olivier’s.”

“This is the thing the venture capital people put together?”

“That’s the one.”

“Good. Someone needs to show these kids how we do business in this town.”

“I put it on your calendar.”

“Great. Can we move on to Stoneflag?”

“Yes, of course.” Marta shifted in her seat, which squeaked in response. “May I make a suggestion before we move forward?”

Mr. Claibourne’s face pinched with impatience. “Go ahead.”

“This morning I was chatting with Melanie, Mr. Washburn’s assistant, while we were setting up the conference call.” Marta relaxed because her boss was smiling

now. He loved this sort of inside information. “And she mentioned that his dog is very sick.”

“Sure, his Weimaraner. A champion show dog at one time, I think.”

“Well, I got the distinct impression that Mr. Washburn is very attached to the dog.”

Mr. Claibourne nodded. “Okay. . .”

“Well, sir, I just thought it would be a nice touch to maybe send some sort of Get Well card. Seeing as how the dog is so important to him.”

Mr. Claibourne rocked backward in his chair, causing the ficus branches to sway. “Yes, I like it. Good idea. Sending a Get Well card to a dog. Now that’s thinking outside the box.”

“A kind gesture couldn’t hurt.”

“Ms. Sandoval, you’re absolutely right. Can you handle it at lunchtime?”

“Of course, sir.” Marta scribbled a reminder on her Action Items list.

Mr. Claibourne swiveled in this chair and looked out over Montgomery Street. “As long as you’re at it, maybe you could pick up the prescription for me? Two birds with one stone?”

“Of course, sir.” Marta understood that he wouldn’t want anyone to know about the prescription. She wondered if his condition were acting up again.

He swiveled back to face her. “Thank you, Ms. Sandoval.”

Then she saw it again. An occasional sometimes flash across his face, a burst of heat lightning that stripped the tensions from his brow and wiped the shadows from under his eyes.

Just a flash, then he was Mr. Claibourne again.

“Okay, then,” he said. “Let’s move on to the Stoneflag Project. Ms. Sandoval?”

She was still fazed by the weird flash. She covered by flipping to a clean page in her steno pad. “I’m sorry.”

“No problem.” Mr. Claibourne leaned back, ficus leaves spiking into his hair. His hands came together, fingers forming a triangle. “Here’s how I want to handle this. Remember a few years back we helped out that fellow in Yolo County? The Indian casino deal? What was his name?”

Marta remembered the man. “Harlan Briggs?” Briggs had needed some juice in Sacramento to turn some committee votes around.

“That’s him. I want to limit his involvement with Stoneflag but use the same general approach. Call in the NAHA and take charge of the tribal voice right away.” Mr. Claibourne chuckled and rocked back in his chair. “Yes, get Chief Mark out there in front of the cameras. Let’s see how the University types hold up against a bona fide Native American!”

Marta made a note to pull the NAHA, the Native American Heritage Alliance. Claibourne and Briggs had created the NAHA as a front group to provide a veneer of intertribal representation and support for the casino. The NAHA had never amounted to anything more than five people in a storefront office in Esparto, not counting Chief Mark Hawk. Chief Mark was a stock character actor, recognizable from his roles in *F Troop* and virtually every Hollywood Western produced since 1965.

“Does the NAHA still exist?”

“If not in body, at least in spirit. Their charter hasn’t expired. Besides, all we really need is the Chief. Don’t mention him in the presentation, however.”

Marta smiled. “Of course. How soon do you need it? The presentation?”

“Let’s see. . . We’re meeting Stoneflag on Wednesday. . . Let’s just bang out a semifinal draft tonight. We can order in some Thai.”

Marta said nothing. Even if she leveraged the usual boilerplate and presentation templates, she’d be stuck in the office until nine. She didn’t care that it was Friday—she had no plans—but she wanted to be near her sister, Isabel. She didn’t care what the doctor said. She sensed a darker truth behind his calm, baritone reassurances. Isabel needed her.

“Ms. Sandoval? I asked if Thai was all right with you?” Mr. Claibourne smiled. “If you want something else, I’m not particular.”

“No, Mr. Claibourne, it’s not that.” She didn’t know how to ask him. She was very well paid and had flexible hours—some days she hardly worked at all, just covered Mr. Claibourne’s private calls from home—but with the understanding that when push came to shove, her shoulder would be right up against the wheel with his. “It’s my sister, Isabel. The baby. . .”

Mr. Claibourne tilted forward onto his elbows, one finger scratching at his short beard. “Oh? Is she all right? I thought she wasn’t due for a few more months.”

“She’s having complications. I didn’t get all the details from the doctor.” He was so understanding, she felt bad about lying. She’d forgotten how easy he could be sometimes. Easier than his father, certainly.

He nodded and spoke softly, gravely. "I understand. What did the doctors say?"

"Well, you know, they always tell you not to worry. . . "

"They said that? Was this Dr. Spungen?" Mr. Claibourne had had to pull strings to get Dr. Spungen for Isabel. He was in that much demand.

"Yes, he said. . . "

"Well, whatever he said, I would listen to him. He's one of the best, uh, pregnancy doctors in the country. If he says not to worry, well, doctor's orders and all that. The best thing is to let him do the worrying. Keep your mind on other things."

Marta's jaw tightened. "Yes, Mr. Claibourne."

She wasn't angry. She wanted him to be right about the doctor and about the pregnancy. She wanted him to be right about everything.

But she knew he was wrong.

Chapter 8

For the first few years that Tommy lived on Cole Street, Blind Johnny Ray never hit him up for spare change. It didn't matter that Johnny's favorite bench was just two doors down from Tommy's building, or that Tommy passed him, sitting there, at least twice a day.

Tommy began to wonder if it was him.

Johnny always seemed to be chatting with other neighborhood folks, smiling and laughing, his teeth flashing in the San Francisco sunlight. In his trademark sheepskin coat, Johnny lounged upon that bench like a mountain man making a guest appearance on *The Tonight Show*, a silver-maned Grizzly Adams with dark glasses and white cane.

And if anyone happened by with spare coins or doggy-bag leftovers, he didn't seem to mind.

But never once did he ask Tommy for anything. Not even a quarter.

Things changed around Tommy's third Christmas in the neighborhood.

One windy Saturday, Johnny was making a scene outside the Postal Chase, the local mailbox and shipping store. With a metal newspaper dispenser as a workbench, he was trying to box up and wrap some toys—, red and blue Power Ranger action figures still in their plastic and cardboard packaging.

Johnny would be managing just fine, his fingers feeling along the edges of the box and folding the burlap over just so. But then the tape dispenser kept falling and the wind kept pulling at the paper until he had to stop and start over.

After a few rounds of this, the paper was crumpled almost beyond use. Tangles of tape clung to Johnny's beard. He hurled curses like thunderbolts, causing all the café-goers and holiday shoppers to cross the street to avoid the yelling crazy man. Tommy was about to do the same, but his girl said awww and pursed her lips in a way that made him dizzy.

So he stepped up, went over to Johnny and offered to help. Tommy took two minutes to wrap and seal the box, and he even paid for the shipping to Albuquerque, much to his girl's delight. They went back to Tommy's place, stopping for a bottle of wine at Alpha Market.

A few days later, Tommy passed Johnny on his bench and ventured a Hello. This time Johnny answered and Tommy felt a warm rush of surprise. Johnny invited him to join him on the bench, and Tommy obliged.

“Hey, thanks a lot for your help. With the presents for my boys, I mean.” Johnny told him about his twin sons and how, no matter what, he sent them Christmas presents every year. “My wife threw my ass out and I can’t be with them on account of I’m a derelict and all.”

Johnny’s dedication seemed sweet, but Tommy couldn’t help piecing together certain details and doing some basic math. Johnny’s kids had to have been fully grown by then. Tommy wondered what they thought about the action figures arriving like clockwork year after year, if his wife hadn’t long since moved and all the toys were piling up in the Albuquerque Post Office. Johnny didn’t exactly have a return address.

“No problem, Johnny,” Tommy told him. “No problem at all.”

The next year, right after Thanksgiving, Johnny stopped Tommy on the corner and, his fingertips like as butterflies on Tommy’s wrist, asked if he could help him wrap and send the presents again.

“And maybe write out the card for me? Since you’re a bona fide journalist and all.”

Tommy laughed and said yes, the same way he would say yes every year after that.

Tommy hadn’t realized it at the time, but that first experience outside the Postal Chase had automatically qualified him for platinum membership in the Blind Johnny Ray Benevolence Society, an ever-shifting group of Cole Valley regulars who looked out for Johnny. They kept Johnny in mind when they sifted through the spare change on their bureaus or cleaned out their closets. Leftover containers of Chinese takeout were invisibly labeled with his name.

This generosity did not extend to all the bums in the neighborhood. Tommy was surprised to find that, despite its hippie heritage, Cole Valley was not particularly civic-minded when it came to the Homeless Problem. Yet everyone treated Johnny like just another neighbor. Somehow he elicited kindness instead of revulsion, even when he was clearly inebriated.

Somehow they didn’t see him as a homeless person.

Johnny began accepting Tommy’s help. Technically, Tommy observed, Johnny never panhandled. He never stood on a corner, extending an empty cup toward

strangers. Rather, he would wait on his bench until he encountered someone who offered help. Whatever it was or wasn't, Tommy never felt panhandled.

A few times, though, Johnny did reach out.

After a bad night at *The Dog*, Tommy came home exhausted. Johnny mumbled something as Tommy passed his bench.

“What did you say, Johnny?”

Johnny's head dipped forward. After a long pause, he said, “Nothing.”

“No. What's up?” Tommy came around the front and sat next to him.

“Can you help me?” Johnny seemed genuinely embarrassed. “I'm hungry.”

He hadn't eaten since the day before, so Tommy took him down to Haight Street and bought him a burrito. They sat in the little park by the Metro tunnel on Carl Street. As Johnny ate, Tommy collected the scraps of foil wrapping and crunched them into a silver ball. The night was quiet and the sky full of pink fog.

The occasional mercy burrito was as far as Tommy's financial generosity stretched. As a struggling hedonist with no real job, he had little to offer, cash-wise. He tried to compensate in other ways, with leftovers or little gifts. Tommy supplemented his meager *Dog* paycheck with catering gigs, so he often brought home leftovers. Mini-quiche hors d'oeuvres and slab ends of brisket.

But the most memorable thing Tommy ever gave Johnny wasn't food, but an improbable *Playboy* magazine in Braille that he found in Aardvark Books. Two dollars. Just a thick sheaf of brown burlap riddled with punched-out dots and the famous bunny logo stamped on the cover in black ink.

“Can you read Braille, Johnny?”

“Sure, man, watcha got?”

Tommy handed him the *Playboy* and waited as his fingers danced across the cover. Then Johnny chuckled and solemnly promised to only read the articles.

Then came the winter that El Niño blew through town like a giant gray industrial mop, dumping endless rain and scouring the trees and power lines. Falling branches punched four million dollars' worth of holes in the Conservatory of Flowers, a Victorian confection of white frosted glass in Golden Gate Park.

One night, Tommy found Johnny soaked and huddled in a basement doorway on Carl Street. Tommy brought him back to his building, thinking he could stay in the garage. The landlord, Baba Ram Paul, had an old microbus up on blocks, and

it would not be the first time one of the tenants had used it as an ad hoc guest room.

After getting him clean and dry, Tommy set Johnny up with some old sleeping bags and told him he could come up the back stairs to the use the bathroom off the sun porch. Tommy's roommates weren't crazy about the arrangement, but Tommy shamed them into compliance.

This scheme lasted exactly thirty-six hours, ending the morning that Johnny emerged from the van, stretching and growling like a grizzly bear. He didn't notice Katherine, the financial analyst from the second floor, putting out her recycling. She screamed and tripped up the back stairs, ripping open her shin along the way.

Baba Ram Paul arrived ahead of the cops. Tommy recognized the bony rap of his knuckles against his front door.

"You know anything about somebody living in the garage?" Baba Ram Paul was a skinny old ponytail hippie who always wore paint-splattered overalls with lots of pockets and loops.

He was not happy when Tommy fessed up.

"He has to go, man. I'm sorry. You know I don't mind about the van, but Katherine is too freaked out. I thought she was gonna burst a blood vessel, she was screaming so much."

"I'm sorry, Ram Paul. I'll deal with it." Tommy knew that not so many years before, Baba Ram Paul would've let Johnny ride out the storm in the garage, as long as someone vouched for him.

But times had changed. The city had changed. The New Economy was driving rents into the stratosphere, and Cole Valley had quiet, tree-lined streets and charming shops and cafés. People like Katherine or William, the lawyer on the third floor, were happy to pay a premium to live there. Every time someone like Tommy moved out, Baba Ram Paul did a quick remodel and moved in the Katherines and the Williams at three times the rent.

There was no room for the Johnnies in the new equation. Not even in the garage. At least Johnny had made it through the worst of the storm. Tommy bought him some coffee at Spinelli's and apologized for the way things had gone down.

Johnny just laughed. "No worries, Tommy. You probably saved my life. Weird for you to apologize and all!"

Tommy left to go to work, and that was the last time he saw Johnny.

By then, Tommy's life was changing, too. He hadn't met Carlotta yet, but he'd already taken strides toward getting out of journalism and into writing that actually paid decent money. Volunteer work for nonprofits, such as writing press releases and Web site content, had led to referrals for paying assignments.

Less than a year after El Niño, Tommy gave notice to Baba Ram Paul so he could move into Carlotta's place near Dolores Park in the Mission. Throughout the packing and garage sale and dropping off crap at GoodWill on Haight Street, he'd held onto the old sleeping bags that had gotten Johnny through the storm. He wanted Johnny to have them.

But Johnny was gone.

Mike at the Tassajara Café had heard that Johnny had bummed a ride down to LA and then headed east, into the desert. Probably trying to get back to Albuquerque, Tommy guessed. After loading the final box into a newly leased Jetta, Tommy drove around the neighborhood, from Golden Gate Park to Buena Vista Park, just in case. But there was no sign of the blind man.

Tommy left the sleeping bags on Johnny's bench. Winter had just arrived; someone would be happy to have them. Tommy prayed silently for Johnny's wellbeing, then put the Jetta in gear and drove out of Cole Valley.

Chapter 9

Tommy dropped down the Seventh Street off ramp, the Hall of Justice looming before him like a giant cinder block. No matter how many trees and shrubs they planted around the jail, its essential jail-ness remained, emanating bleakness and stripping the brightness from all colors for blocks around.

At the light, Tommy called Sergeant Guardino.

“I’m pulling up now.”

“We’re right inside the main entrance.”

Tommy could barely hear him against the background chatter.

He parked in the main lot and stepped out into the bright early morning light. The sun had burned away all but the thickest patches of summer fog. A beautiful day, even in proximity to the jail. Tommy was secretly happy to be away from the office, away from the overheated Valley and in air-conditioned San Francisco, elated with the taboo pleasure of playing hooky.

On the sidewalk, Tommy dodged the parade of the previous night’s catch, recently released. Prostitutes with crooked wigs, gangbangers with low-slung baggie jeans, bleary-eyed party boys in black street shoes and silk bowling shirts, all followed closely by their lawyers or grandmothers or girlfriends, who were grim and quiet and seething with so much disappointment that Tommy could smell it. Some of the guys wore bad-boy smirks infused with the secret joy of their bad-boy escapades. They snickered and bumped shoulders like school kids sent to the principal’s office.

Inside the lobby, a cacophony of ringing cell phones and static-y radios bounced off the marble and wrapped around the shouts of jailhouse lawyers and cops. A pungent bouquet of lemon-pine industrial cleaner cleared Tommy’s sinuses, then scraped them raw.

He blinked, trying to adjust to the inadequate light. Someone tapped his shoulder and he turned to come face-to-chest with a wall of black leather and jangling chains. Guardino smiled down at him though a groomed mustache, the ends waxed into points.

“You Delacroix?”

“Sergeant Guardino. My pleasure.” Tommy offered his hand, and the cop shook it, grinding his knuckles.

“Thanks for coming up on such short notice.”

“No problem, no problem.” Tommy twisted his hand free and looked around. Everyone seemed to be a head taller than him. “So where’s Johnny?”

“Right here.” Guardino stepped away. Johnny was sitting on a bench behind him, examining the back of his hand. He looked up and fixed Tommy with his piercing blue eyes.

“Johnny?”

At the sound of Tommy’s voice, Johnny grinned and jumped up to enclose Tommy in a bear hug. Mashed against Johnny’s chest, Tommy’s nose filled up with ratty sheepskin and good old-fashioned body odor.

Tommy checked the time as they pulled out of the parking lot. His bagel-free belly cried out for attention. Just past ten-thirty; they had time.

“I’m hungry, Johnny. You up for a burrito, maybe some tacos?”

“Tacos, yes!” Johnny fidgeted, his eyes darting about in every direction. “Where are we? What part of town?”

They’d just crossed under the highway. “Uh, kinda SoMa, kinda Mission. . .”

“Yes, the Mission! I know this smell!” Johnny blinked away tears as they passed the graffiti-ed warehouses, weed-spotted lots, and tangled chain link fences. “I. . . I’d forgot how beautiful it all was.”

Johnny shook, with weeping, and the car shook with him.

Tommy didn’t know what to say. Johnny really actually no-doubt-at-all could see again. Tommy wondered if maybe he had never really actually been blind, that maybe it had been a temporary condition that somehow reversed itself. Tommy had heard stories about blind people regaining their sight after getting knocked in the head.

But Johnny’s eyes. . . Tommy couldn’t stop stealing glances at those perfect, sapphire bright blues. He remembered how they’d looked before: milky marbles, fingerpaint smears of gray and white, as devoid of light as stones.

How was it possible?

Tommy picked up a tray of tacos and a couple of cans of soda from a roach coach off 24th Street. He cut west across the Mission, looking for a nice place to

park. On impulse, he kept going towards Twin Peaks, the highest point in San Francisco.

“How about a picnic, Johnny?”

“Sounds good to me, boss!”

They drove in silence for a few blocks.

“So, you moved out of Cole Valley.”

“Yeah,” Tommy said. “It’s been a couple of years now. I’m living over by Dolores Park, off Church. I moved in with my fiancée, Carlotta.”

“You getting married? Congratulations, man. That’s great.” Johnny clapped Tommy on the shoulder. Tommy almost steered into the curb.

“Thanks. Yeah, she’s really nice. Maybe you’ll get a chance to meet her.”

“I hope so!” Johnny shook his head. “So where you working now? Dave said you’d left *The Dog*.”

“Dave?”

“Dave Guardino. The cop? He said you had to come up from the Peninsula?”

“Yeah, I’m working for a high tech company now. Got tired of working for *The Dog*, so now I’m working for the Man!”

Johnny seemed to miss the joke. “Must pay all right. This looks like a nice car.”

“Yeah, I leased it just before I left Cole Valley, actually.” Tommy paused. “I looked for you before I left. I heard you went into the desert or something.”

Johnny shrugged and looked out the window at the houses on Clipper Street. “New Mexico. I wanted to see my kids. Couldn’t find ‘em.”

“I’m sorry.”

Johnny shrugged. “It’s all right. All good things in all good time. Woulda been nice to see my boys, though.”

Up on Twin Peaks, vendors ran about, hawking red Forty-Niners hoodies to baggy-shorted tourists shivering in the cold Pacific wind. They approached Tommy, immediately identified him as a local, and veered off.

Johnny hopped up on the low wall and Tommy followed, bags of tacos in hand. San Francisco sparkled below them like the Emerald City. Rows of staid houses climbed the hills like a Victorian roller coaster. Antique street cars plied their way up Market Street. The Golden Gate and Bay Bridges, both in remarkable focus, leapt across the blue waters to the hills and mountains beyond.

Johnny shook his head, muttering to himself. Finally, he sucked in his breath and reached out his arms in either supplication or embrace or both. He startled Tommy with a sudden, joyous shout.

Tommy sat on the wall, and coaxed Johnny to join him.

“So, Johnny. . . ”

“Hmmm?” His mouth was full.

“So what happened? The whole blindness thing.”

And Johnny told him.

The previous night, Johnny and a woman named Sabrina had gone into the park to sleep. They'd heard that people were camping out in the gap between the Shakespeare Garden and the Academy of Sciences. The place was crowded when they arrived, but they were welcomed and space was made.

During the night, Johnny sprang awake, full of panic, thinking the police were raiding the encampment. He sat up and listened, but sensed no commotion, no panic. Just the smell of pine sap, eucalyptus, and unwashed humanity. Then came a murmuring excitement that reminded him of when he was in the Army, when it was the weekend and everyone was shaving and spiffing up to go into town. An anticipation.

He called out for Sabrina, but she didn't answer. He caught his breath and tried to understand what the others were whispering.

“Is it Him?”

“Is He coming?”

“Have you seen Him?”

Then silence. Silence like the desert. Johnny stood and called out for Sabrina again.

Hands rested on his shoulders. He thought it must be her, so gentle was the touch. Instead, a man's voice answered.

“It's all right, Johnny. Your friend is right here. How are you this evening?”

Johnny stiffened, but a relentless sensation of well-being washed over him, emanating from the Man's touch. “I just want to find my friend,” Johnny said.

“I'm your friend, too. We're brothers, you and I.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have any brothers!” Johnny pulled away. He’d met lots of crazies on the streets, and this joker sounded like just one more, with an extra helping of weird. Where was Sabrina? Why wasn’t she protecting him?

The Man’s voice remained calm. “Come on, Johnny. Don’t you recognize me? Doesn’t my voice ring a bell?”

“I never met you before in my life!” Johnny’s chest tightened. He was cold again.

“Sure, you have, Johnny. You remember me.”

Johnny opened his mouth to say No! But something did stir inside him, a tectonic rumbling that slowly grew. He sank to his knees and trembled. All the years in darkness, his children lost to him. All the shadows of his life collapsed upon him like an old barn.

Then Johnny felt the Man’s hands again, this time on his face, cupping his eyes, gripping his temples. . .

Tommy paused in mid-bite. Taco meat tumbled onto his napkin. “And that was it? That’s all he did?”

“Well, he sang some, too.”

Tommy shook his head. There had to be more to it. A sharp blow. An impact.

“And then. . . ” Johnny looked up to the sky. “Then I was seeing the night stars. I didn’t think anything at first. Even when I was blind, I still had light shows all the time in my head. But then I saw pieces of fog blowing by, the lights on the hill. I looked down, and there was everyone. I could see, Tommy. I could see!”

His face crumpled and he was weeping again.

Tommy looked away. What to make of all this? Johnny was completely sincere. Whatever had actually happened, he believed what he believed. “But then you saw the guy, right? What did he look like? Can you describe him?”

Johnny wiped at his tears with a dirty knuckle. “You’re gonna think I’m crazy.”

“It’s okay.”

Johnny fixed his blue eyes on Tommy like twin lasers. “When I looked down, I saw an angel in a shimmering robe.”

Tommy barked out a laugh. It just came, he couldn’t help it.

“See what I mean?” Johnny crossed his arms.

"I'm sorry. It was just nervous laughter. You have to admit. . ." Tommy swallowed hard and shook it off. All that talk about light shows in his head . . . , who knows what Johnny might have been high on? "Sorry, I'm sorry. Okay. Okay. So what did he look like? His face."

Johnny shrugged. "Kind of a short guy with a beard, in a shining white robe."

Tommy looked away to stifle another laugh. "Like Jesus?"

"Yeah, Tommy, it was Jesus. You must think I really am a nut job." Johnny shook his head and smiled. "Well, hell, maybe I am crazy."

Tommy felt bad, but still had to fight not to laugh. "I'm not saying you saw Jesus, but just maybe someone on a Jesus trip, you know?"

Johnny drained his soda, shook the empty can. "I don't know, man."

"Okay, then, was there anything else about him you can remember? You say he was short. What color was his hair? How old do you think he was?"

Johnny shrugged. "He looked like you. About your age, I guess. Dark hair. Good haircut, too. Trimmed real nice. You know, a clean-cut guy." Johnny smiled. "Not exactly like that old hippie, Jesus, eh?"

Tommy laughed. "So he has a better barber. What about the robe? Maybe it was an overcoat?"

"Let me see." Johnny closed his eyes. "It had a belt. And that scrilly-scrolly stuff stitched in, right here, like initials." Johnny tapped the spot over his heart.

"Okay, okay." Tommy found this reassuring. Angels, let alone Jesus, didn't run around in monogrammed robes. "Could you make out the letters?"

"Man, I wasn't even trying." Johnny smiled and Tommy wondered how a homeless man could have such nice teeth. "I mean, I was just looking at everything. 'Looking' isn't even the word. More like everything was pouring into me. And besides, he was already off with someone else."

"Someone else? Did you witness any other. . . healings?" Somehow Tommy couldn't say 'miracles.'

"Tommy, I told you, man. I wasn't paying attention." Johnny looked down at the ground. "Wish I had, though. Maybe I wouldn't have lost sight of him. I want to find him again. Maybe you can help me?"

"Sure." Tommy looked down at the half-eaten taco in his hand. He set it down and sipped his soda. "So all he did was give you some kind of a massage? What about this singing part? Was it like a chant or a prayer or what?"

Johnny smiled. "It'll sound crazy."

"We're way past crazy, Johnny. Come on, show me what he did."

"You mean, like demonstrate? On you?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Okay, man, but don't blame me if you end up blind. For all I know this shit works in reverse, too."

"I'll take my chances. Now, come on, just show me."

"Whatever you say, boss." Johnny rubbed his hands together and cracked his knuckles. "Okay, let me see. He held my head like this. . ."

Tommy closed his eyes as Johnny's hands, big and rough as baseball mitts, wrapped around his eyes and temple. They smelled of cola and concrete and tortilla.

"Okay, then he. . . Tommy, man, you need to relax. I need to be able to move your head no problem. I'm gonna sing, and at the end of each line, I'm gonna roll your head back, okay?"

"Okay," Tommy said, but it wasn't easy. His neck muscles started protesting, tensing up. He took a deep breath and told himself to let go, to trust Johnny.

Johnny adjusted his grip and started singing:

Well, it's one for the money. . .

Two for the show. . .

Three to get ready. . .

At the end of each line, as promised, he gently rolled Tommy's head back, then relaxed so it rolled forward by itself.

Now go, cat, go!

This time he thrust Tommy's head backward very hard, as if he were hard-passing a basketball.

Tommy did not go blind, but . . . a floating feeling, like that moment between sleep and waking before he had any sense of identity or time or place. A voice in his head sang the next couple of lines. But don't you step on my blue suede shoes. . . You can do anything but lay off my blue suede shoes.

"Tommy? Tommy? You all right?"

Tommy opened his eyes. Where had he gone?

“Whew!” Johnny smiled wide. “Man, you had me scared, like maybe I’d really messed you up or something.”

Tommy shook his head, like a dog shaking off the rain. “That was weird. For a second, I thought. . .” But that thought was already gone. “It’s just that. . . I don’t know. . .”

Tommy regrouped mentally. Focus on the task at hand. “So, Johnny, this guy. Was he alone?”

Johnny’s eyes widened. “Now that you mention it, there was this woman who seemed to be with him.”

“A woman?”

“Yes! The Rainbow Woman! How could I forget? She was this big-boned gal draped all in rainbow colors. She was there when I opened my eyes. She helped hold me up cuz I was in shock and all. Then I think she followed the Man.”

Great. First Jesus in a monogrammed robe and now the Rainbow Woman. “Johnny, I got to ask. . .”

“What? If I was high when I saw Jesus and the Rainbow Woman?”

“No, but. . .” How had Johnny known what he was thinking? He shook it off. “I just thought I’d ask. Maybe you brought some peyote back from the desert, took a little trip into the ancestral vaults of the subconscious. You know, weird scenes inside the mytho-poetic gold mine.”

Johnny shook his head. “Would that matter? You see anything mytho-poetic in these eyeballs?”

Tommy had no answer. He had no question.

Johnny scooped up the trash from his lunch and balled it up. “Didn’t you say you had to be somewhere?”

“Yeah.” Tommy thought about the meeting and the press release and Claude and what they’d talked about that morning. The crisis of a certain magnitude. “You have to understand, Johnny, how crazy all this sounds.”

“I know, man! You think I don’t know that?” Johnny grabbed Tommy by the wrist. “Listen, there’s something else.”

Tommy tried to pull away. Johnny’s grip only tightened.

“I can’t tell you how, Tommy, but you know these people. You know them. The Man and the Rainbow Woman.”

“What?! How?”

“I can’t say. Not because it’s a secret. I mean, I could tell you, but you wouldn’t get it.”

“Try me.”

“Let’s just say, I can see it. I look at you and I can see it.”

Chapter 10

Graduation. Anniversary. Birthday. Get Well.

The last time Marta had bought a Get Well card in this particular pharmacy, it had been for Mr. Claibourne Senior, right after his first stroke. She'd bought two cards that day: a big one for people in the office to sign; and a smaller one with a blue watercolor on the front, just from her.

After the second and third strokes, there had been no time. The firm was in crisis, and uncertainty pervaded the halls. That was when Mr. Claibourne Junior left business school to take over.

Marta wished she'd visited the poor man more often back then, when he might have still recognized her. What would be the point now?

She frowned. The Get Well section offered few choices, fewer still that were suitable for a dog. Most of the cards were either too formal, with an excess of curly calligraphy and frills, like wedding invitations printed on doilies. Or too silly, based on stupid jokes.

"Laughter is the best medicine," read one that featured the Three Stooges in surgical garb, wielding stethoscopes and tongue depressors. Larry sported a disc mirror on a headband. Inside: "Unfortunately, it's not covered by your health plan! Get Well Soon!"

Marta sighed. Maybe this was a bad idea.

She didn't like Mr. Claibourne Senior the first time she met him. She was a legal secretary then for Drake Noyes, Mr. Claibourne's private attorney.

"Who's this?" Mr. Claibourne asked, not looking at her. "Why is she here?"

Drake rolled his eyes. "Someone has to take notes."

"What happened to Claire?"

"She got married and moved to Danville." Drake ran his fingers along his graying temples. "This is Marta Sandoval. She's very good. Now sit down, Charlie. This is already costing you a fortune."

Mr. Claibourne did not sit down. He continued to huff, arms crossed. "You can trust her? She seems too young."

Marta understood that he didn't mean young in years. He meant innocent, inexperienced, unprepared for concerns of Claibourne magnitude. The idea made her smirk.

"I trust her completely, Charlie. More than Claire." Drake winked at Marta. Mr. Claibourne softened. He sat down and the meeting started.

A few months later, Mr. Claibourne had come to trust her, too. So much so, he lured her to Claibourne & Sons with a generous package. More than she could have ever hoped to earn as a legal secretary, certainly.

At the end of the aisle, Marta saw a stack of blue and pink teddy bears in diapers, the words "My First Bear" printed across the buttocks. She thought about her strange intuition about Lazlo. Something bad was going to happen, but she also had a vision of the baby alive and strong and playing in the yard with his cousins. Could both be possible?

She turned her attention back to the cards, opening one with two scientists in lab coats with a microscope. "They've finally found a cure for your mid-life crisis," the cover read. The inside of the card showed what was under the microscope: floating among amoebic blobs were a convertible, golf clubs, and a blonde with an exaggerated cleavage.

Marta shook her head, and slipped the card back into the white wire rack. The card had stirred an old pain, poked a finger into the hole that her ex-husband Hector had burned into her heart. The pain rose in her chest like heartburn. But only briefly. After twenty years, Marta had become a past master at keeping her focus on the task at hand.

Maybe a blank card with a handwritten message. She scanned the category labels, spotted a rotating display down the next aisle. There must be one with a dog.

For the ten years that Marta worked for Mr. Claibourne Senior, he was never anything but cordial. He occasionally asked about her mother and her sisters, but only in the most perfunctory manner. He didn't really want to know, and Marta would oblige him with an equally perfunctory, "They are well, thank you for asking."

Mr. Claibourne never discussed his own family. Two years would pass before Marta would learn that he had a son. Drake Noyes had once mentioned a tragedy that had claimed Mr. Claibourne's wife and daughter, but never divulged anything further.

One day, Marta came back from lunch to find two teenage boys, fifteen or sixteen at most, lounging in the private waiting area outside Mr. Claibourne's office. Both boys wore polo shirts over ragged jeans, and were busy kicking each other's feet out of boredom.

"May I help you?" She hung up her coat and bag.

The boys ignored her and escalated to elbow jabs.

"Excuse me? May I help you?" She spoke more loudly but remained calm and courteous. For all she knew, they were waiting for someone who was visiting Mr. Claibourne. Old friends often dropped by unscheduled and unannounced.

One boy gazed up at her with glazed, reptilian eyes. "Yeah, get us a couple of Cokes, por favor."

Marta stiffened. "Are you waiting for Mr. Claibourne?"

The boy grunted. "I am Mr. Claibourne, chica!"

The other boy giggled. "Yeah, chee-ca!"

The first boy grabbed him in a headlock. "Now how about those Cokes?"

Marta stood and crossed her arms. She was about to unleash a volcanic surge of Spanish when the double doors opened, and Mr. Claibourne emerged from the inner office. He pulled on his coat, a weird smile pasted on his face.

"It's all right, Ms. Sandoval." He turned to the teenagers. "Come on, boys. Let's go."

Calm and obedient, they stood and pulled on ski jackets. Mr. Claibourne put his arm around the shoulder of the reptilian boy. "Ms. Sandoval, this is my son, Charles Junior. And this is his friend, Tad."

At once Marta caught the resemblance, even though the boy's face was a mask of scowling disdain. The fine brow and slender nose, the set jaw and cleft chin. All Claibourne.

Marta forced a smile. "The pleasure is all mine."

When they left, it occurred to Marta that Mr. Claibourne had no photos of his son in his office, let alone his late wife and daughter. The walls were measured off with oil portraits of his father, grandfather, various uncles and great uncles, and of course, the renowned progenitor, Basil Claibourne.

But no one else.

At the display of blank cards, Marta spotted the perfect one. So perfect, she couldn't believe it. The front showed a vintage black-and-white photo of a hunter kneeling next to a black Labrador, the dog's coat gleaming and wet. In the background, but still in focus, was the spoked wheel and curving fender of a jalopy.

Perfect.

She pulled out a matching blue envelope from behind the cards, the message already composing itself in her head.

The day Mr. Claibourne Junior started running the firm, he acted as if they were meeting for the first time. She reminded him that they'd met before. He merely blinked and nodded. "Of course we have."

The first few months were difficult as he dug through the accounts. Mr. Claibourne Senior had organized the clients by business category, with a vice president dedicated for each division. Though he devoted his own time to Special Services, he kept tabs on every deal, every client. Mr. Claibourne Junior was no different, determined to personally review every case.

"I don't want any surprises," he told Marta.

The vice presidents cycled through in predictable rotation, offering counsel, which Mr. Claibourne took in stride, careful to distinguish advice from attempts to influence or control him. Marta was impressed: the young man saw through them all.

After four months, he called a special meeting. He summarily fired three of the vice presidents in front of the others, before everyone had had a chance to take their seats. After the three men were escorted out, Mr. Claibourne turned to the others.

He started by thanking them for their service and loyalty. He then spoke directly and in detail about specific problems and failures that he had found buried in their files. Broken contracts. Deals lost through inattention. Affairs with employees.

Some of the executives grew red with anger, others with embarrassment. Who did this boy think he was?

Marta, sitting behind Mr. Claibourne, almost felt sorry for them. She could see the surprise and fear in their aging faces. They gnawed on their lips and glanced at the other in a vain search for comprehension.

Mr. Claibourne finished by addressing them as a group. “Don’t ever lie to me. Never hide anything from me. You can’t bury the truth deep enough. It’ll surface and I won’t care how many years you’ve been with the firm or how close you were to my father. I will dismiss you in a red-hot second.”

His voice downshifted.

“Most of you are very old friends of my father. Some of you I’ve known my entire life. I might have even called you Uncle on occasion. But listen to me now. We are here to do business.”

He turned away from them and lowered his head, as if formulating his next sentence. He glanced back at Marta and winked at her, like they were sharing a joke. But it was not a Drake Noyes wink, which were always intended to lighten the mood, break up the tension. No, Mr. Claibourne’s wink was disconcerting. Was he enjoying this?

“If you are truly a friend of my father, if you want to pay him respect, then help me. Please. I need your counsel and your expertise. I need your wisdom. But above all, I need your honesty. Thank you. That’s all for now.”

Mr. Claibourne stared straight ahead while the executives filed out. No one attempted to speak to him.

Marta expected him to comment about the meeting, but instead he asked her to send for the IT manager. One of his priorities was to upgrade the computer network, to bring the company into the twentieth century, as he put it.

After six months, the transition was complete. Claibourne & Sons had become Claibourne & Associates, and Charles Claibourne Junior had become Mr. Claibourne in full.

He surprised Marta with a twenty-percent raise. When she went in to thank him, he was adjusting the position of the ficus tree, which had been delivered and installed that same morning.

As soon as the words “thank you” left her lips, he cut her off with a raised palm.

“You’ve proved your worth, Marta. I couldn’t have made it without you. If that means making you the highest paid admin in the known universe. . . ” He smiled and chuckled. “Tell me, does this tree look centered okay to you?”

She said that it did.

Card in hand, Marta headed for the prescription counter in the back of the store. There was no line, only a gentleman in his sixties being attended to by the pharmacist.

Marta didn't recognize the pharmacist. She hoped that wouldn't be a problem.

The gentleman folded his glasses and left. The pharmacist waved her over.

Marta glided up to the counter, and did not smile. "You have a prescription for Mr. Charles Claibourne, I believe."

The pharmacist nodded and stepped away. "One moment, please."

Marta retained her poise, holding herself the way Mr. Claibourne Senior had taught her. Jaw fixed, slightly tense. Chin held just so. Eyelids slightly relaxed, free of tension yet alert. Shoulders back, hip canted. Expectant. Hands clasped casually at the waist unless there's a problem. Arms crossed if there's a delay, if they're making you wait. Hands on hips and chest out, if you are challenged. Represent power when dealing with subordinates. Represent Claibourne.

The pharmacist returned, printout in hand. "Sorry for the delay. May I ask, what is your relationship to Charles Claibourne?"

"Excuse me?" Marta crossed her arms.

"I'm sorry, but this sort of prescription, well. . ." He scratched the thin blonde hair on his temple. "We're only supposed to give this directly to the patient. We're supposed to confirm ID, and. . ." He registered Marta's glare and stopped.

Robert, the manager who knew Marta personally, emerged from the glassed-off area behind the counter. "Is everything all right, Phil?"

Without waiting for an answer, he edged Phil aside. "Good afternoon, Ms. Sandoval. How's everything today?"

She smiled. "Just fine, thank you."

"Great! Let me take care of you. Sorry for any delays."

Marta eased her stance and pretended to look for something in her purse. She listened to the two pharmacists conversing beyond the high wall.

"Certain customers are allowed to send proxies to pick up their meds."

"Even when it's ampheta—"

"Especially when it's this sort of prescription, yes. You think the mayor or governor pick up their own meds?"

"So who is this Claibourne guy? I've never heard of him."

"Old San Francisco money and no one you want to get on the wrong side of."

A moment later, Robert reappeared with a white bag. "Here you go, Ms. Sandoval. I can ring you up right here."

Marta slid the greeting card across the counter. “Don’t forget this.”

“Not a problem.” He slipped the card into the bag. “Should we charge this to the corporate or personal account?”

“Personal.” Marta took the bag. “Thank you, Robert.”

As she walked away, she pulled the prescription bottle from the bag. The familiar tiny green and white capsules lay jumbled inside, their true colors distorted by the orange plastic. The label didn’t specify the drug by name, only: For Sleeping Disorder.

That was funny. The pills had nothing to do with sleeping. Quite the opposite.

Chapter 11

Tommy had to get back to work, but first he had to find a way to stay in touch with Johnny. A fistful of quarters and his cell number did not a solution make. Partway down Twin Peaks Boulevard, high above the Haight, he turned impulsively onto Clarendon Avenue, curving down through the shadows of the eucalyptus forest toward the same Radio Hut where he'd bought his own cell phone.

An electronic beep sounded as they entered the store. It was empty. Johnny drifted left, his attention snared by a bank of screens that showed his own face staring right back, courtesy of a display of video cameras.

Tommy headed for the counter and scanned the phones, all sparkling under halogen spotlights. Of course, the model that had cost him two hundred bucks barely a year before was now free with a service plan. A shuffling sound emerged from the back of the store. A potato-shaped man with a handlebar mustache and wispy, balding blonde hair came forward, wiping his fingers on a napkin. His mustache shifted around as his tongue swept his teeth clean.

“Good morning, sir, how may I help you?” His glance ping-ponged between Tommy and Johnny.

“Hi, yes, I’m thinking about adding a new phone to my account.”

The clerk held up an index finger. “One moment, sir.” He turned toward Johnny. His brow darkened. “Excuse me! Hey! You!”

Johnny dropped down from a tippy-toed stance and looked back at the clerk.

“He’s with me,” Tommy said.

The clerk’s mouth froze in pre-bark.

“Is that a problem?” Tommy couldn’t believe this asshole. “I could go somewhere else.”

The clerk’s brow softened. “How may I help you today?”

The whole transaction took ten minutes, including activation of the new phone. The cheapest way was to add the new phone to the plan Tommy shared with Carlotta. He selected the same model because it was free (with service plan

renewal, of course) and he could swap in his existing battery, which still had a strong charge. Tommy had a charger in the car and at the office, so using the empty battery wouldn't be a problem. He programmed his cell into the new phone and vice versa. He showed Johnny how to call him.

"Punch in the shortcut, then push Send."

"I think I got it, boss."

"You'll need to keep it charged. An hour here and an hour there should be enough."

"No worries."

"Ask Mike at Tassajara. He'll let you plug it in." Tommy wondered if the Blind Johnny Ray Benevolence Society still existed.

"Sure, plus laundromats usually have open outlets."

"Oh they do, do they?"

Johnny just smiled.

Tommy dropped Johnny off at Oak and Cole, and stepped on the gas, anxious to get to Highway 101. It was almost noon.

He called Carlotta and got her voicemail. Of course. Friday was yoga at lunch day. He tried Carrie and she picked up.

"Do I need to bail you out?"

Tommy smiled. "Yeah, they're holding me on a million-dollar bond, and you were the first person I thought to call."

"I'll hock the Vespa and be right down!" Carrie chuckled. "But seriously, what was the deal with that cop?"

"Just like you said. He wanted me to pick up Johnny Ray." Tommy took a deep breath and launched into a summary of Johnny's story, including the miracle in the park. He left out the Elvis incantation, not that that made it easier to convince Carrie that he wasn't joking.

"Wow, that's quite a tale, Tommy."

"I know, I know."

"Jesus in a monogrammed robe. Not bad."

“Somebody who thinks he’s Jesus. A copycat Jesus.”

“He thinks he’s Jesus so he tries to perform miracles.”

“Maybe the opposite. Maybe he thinks he’s Jesus because he can perform miracles.”

“But how do you know it’s a miracle?” Carrie asked. “How do you know if Johnny was really blind? Or what kind of blindness? This could all be a fluke.”

“I wondered about the same thing, but. . . ” Tommy told her about his past experience with Johnny’s eyes, how they’d looked like fried marbles.

“Tommy, I believe you, but we’re supposed to be journalists, right? We’re supposed to verify things.”

He laughed. “What do you mean we, white man? You think there’s a story here?”

“Maybe. My spidey sense is tingling.”

“All due respect, Carrie, but this is not exactly the kind of scoop that’ll get you back into CNN’s good graces. *The Weekly World News*, maybe. . . ”

“Very funny, Tommy. Very funny.”

When Carrie graduated from journalism school—Northwestern, no less—she did not pack her car and rush out to San Francisco to labor away at *The Weekly Watch Dog*. Rather, she packed her car and rushed down to Atlanta for a much-coveted internship at CNN. This was before the Gulf War, when CNN was still the scrappy cable news upstart, David slinging stones at the network Goliaths.

One week into the internship, Carrie had about ninety seconds to proofread a lead story about President Reagan’s visit to the Berglas School of Economics in Israel. The way Carrie told it, she was hunched over a Stone Age laptop while people with clipboards and headsets ran around, bumping into her chair. She ran the spell checker, which insisted that Berglas should be Burglar. In her haste, Carrie failed to disabuse the machine of this misconception. Two minutes later, news anchor Bernard Shaw read the story verbatim in the live broadcast, stumbling over and then correcting the name.

Carrie wanted to die. She fled the glares of the news staff, fled the studio, and fled Atlanta. She repacked her car and headed west. She kept driving until she hit Berkeley, where she went on a three-day bender with Miranda, a college friend who was pursuing her Master’s in Radical Feminist Thought. They slept in the same bed during that long weekend.

On Tuesday morning, a very hung-over Carrie found herself staring at her own reflection in the bathroom mirror. More specifically, she found herself staring at the pubic hair glued to her cheek. A hair that was not her own fawnish brown but a rather Miranda-ish jagged black. She plucked it away and the whole night unraveled before her eyes in muted tones of blue.

She sat on the toilet and lit a cigarette, a frilly pink mat protecting her feet from the cold tile. Outside the window, the tips of the Golden Gate Bridge pressed through the fog like red nipples through gauzy cotton.

Welcome to San Francisco, she thought, and blew out the first smoke of a new day.

Two weeks later, she started at *The Dog.*, Bryce, the publisher and founder, couldn't believe his luck at scoring a brand new Northwestern grad.

"Don't scare her off," he warned the staff, including the recently hired Tommy Delacroix. "She's from the Midwest."

"How would we verify it anyway?" Tommy asked.

The line was quiet for a second. "If he's been homeless in San Francisco for more than a couple of years, chances are he's been to SF General on at least one occasion. There'll be a record, maybe even a diagnosis."

Tommy snorted. "You're crazy if you expect me to go rooting around the hospital. I got a real job, you know. I don't have time for this bullshit."

"Easy there, Fido. Take a deep breath and count to ten. Don't worry about that part of it. I know a guy."

"What do you mean, you know a guy?"

Carrie chuckled. "The less you know, the better. I know this guy, a researcher, who deals in medical information. He can find whatever we need."

"You're kidding me."

"Do you want his number? Are you up for this?"

That was a good question. What was Tommy's interest here? A story? The very premise was too shaky and hardly original. Mystical prophets in the park? San Francisco had had more than its share, ranging from harmless acid-dripping Zen Meisters like Stephen Gaskin to truly dangerous revival nut jobs like Jim Jones. They weren't all bad, mostly cases of too much acid mixed with too little understanding of Eastern Philosophy.

It might work as a feel-good feature, a Summer of Love retrospective. *Just as you can still hear great jazz in North Beach, you can still find chemical enlightenment in the Haight-Ashbury!*

Tommy reminded himself that he wasn't even a journalist any more. Not that he ever was much of one. Unlike Carrie, Tommy hadn't been inspired by Watergate and Woodward and Bernstein to study journalism. She was the one with framed photos of Hunter S. Thompson and I.F. Stone on her desk. Tommy was the one who'd become a corporate copywriter, and he had a rush assignment waiting back at the office.

He wanted to tell Carrie that if she wanted a story, she'd have to write it herself. But instead he said, "Sure, email me his number. I'll call him later."

In the end, they decided that Tommy would follow through with Nurse Steve, the so-called researcher. They intended to pay him in trade, as she'd done before, so Carrie would messenger over a bunch of choice comps from the Magic Drawer. Champagne balloon ride in Napa, spa treatments in Sonoma, dinner for two at Boulevard.

They had it all worked out by the time Tommy passed the airport, the halfway point back to his office. He hung up and put Johnny and Carrie and Carlotta and everything out of his mind, and began mentally composing the press release. He had only a couple of hours to get back and get the thing down on paper.

Not a problem.

Chapter 12

You open your eyes.

The light spills through the trees, emeralds dancing on the leaves. Traffic rushes down Oak Street like a river through a gorge, and the sound both soothes and excites. You breathe in and feel the energy dancing all around you. This is the Planet, this is the Moment, this is Home.

You look down Oak and catch one last glimpse of Tommy's car before it disappears among the others. They are so beautiful, the way they leap around each other, flashing silver and blue like salmon swimming upstream.

Regret seeps in. You wish you could have told Tommy everything. Everything the Man said to you, what you've been called to do. But the regret doesn't endure. The time is not right.

Soon.

Soon Tommy will know everything. And he'll be grateful and happy. He saved your life. The least you can do is to save his.

You close your eyes again and wait for the Tug. You feel nothing. You remember what He told you, that it's easier when you're already moving. Just start walking in circles and wait for the Tug to catch you, to pull you in the perfect direction.

You cross over to the Panhandle, that sliver of green that extends from Golden Gate Park like an ocean pier. You walk in an ever-widening circle, and chant:

*Follow the yellow brick road,
Follow the yellow brick road,
Follow follow follow follow follow,
Follow the... .*

And there it is. The Tug draws you north, across the park, and up Stanyan, toward the Richmond and Presidio Heights. Each step feels more certain and right than the one before.

Chapter 13

Even though Tommy had worked at *The Dog* for ten years, he never really considered himself a journalist.

Unlike Bryce Cavanaugh, Tommy had never dreamt of starting his own newspaper to crusade against all the societal ills fit to print. Unlike Curtis Del Mar, who graduated from *The Dog* to *The LA Times*, he couldn't smell corporate wrongdoing and political malfeasance from three counties away. And unlike David Borstein, the city desk editor, he didn't thrive on digging through stacks of courthouse filings with the uncanny certainty of a wild boar rooting out truffles.

Still, Tommy contributed to the Good Fight in his own way. Because he could write circles around every one of them. For all their ideals, intelligence, and grit, they couldn't put together a clear sentence or organize a paragraph to save their lives.

Bryce recognized Tommy's talents the first time Tommy cleaned up his hastily written letter-from-the-publisher columns. Soon Tommy was rewriting most of the features and reviews, applying what Bryce called the Delacroix Touch. Tommy was fast, too, able to rewrite hundreds of column inches every week, with enough time left to cover the occasional restaurant or film review, if the regular writer was sick or on vacation or just pissed at Bryce that week.

Tommy was happy, too. He felt like he was on the inside of Something Big. Working with Bryce and Curtis and David gave Tommy a front-row seat to the harsh realities of San Francisco business and politics, including the misadventures of Claibourne & Associates. Whenever he had to fill in for David on the City Watch column, Tommy merely regurgitated the most recent outrages.

He liked to think they made a difference. During his tenure, *The Dog*'s investigations led directly to the resignations of prominent public officials and helped strengthen the sunshine laws intended to make the municipal decision-making process transparent. At the very least, as Carrie liked to put it, they kept the bastards on their toes.

The paycheck barely covered rent, but the hours were short. Tommy made up the difference with second jobs. At first, he took what he could find: working as a

waiter, bike messenger, and office temp, back and forth, round and round, until he settled into a reliable cycle of catering gigs, mostly bartending at weddings and office parties.

In the end, the money was enough for a young man to stay alive in San Francisco and have some fun. And in those days, it was all about the fun.

Not that Tommy never called himself a journalist, especially when he found himself dancing with a cute girl at the Albion or Nightbreak on a random Saturday night. He'd shout over the music that he was an indie journalist for the city's leading arts and entertainment rag. If she looked doubtful, he'd grab a convenient copy (*The Dog* being stacked on every corner in town), leaf over to the masthead, and pin his thumb to his name.

Thomas Delacroix, Contributing Editor: It never failed to impress.

And though impoverished, Tommy was never a cheap date. Au contraire! Over the years, Tommy treated his female companions to hot-air balloon excursions over the Napa Valley, with complimentary champagne; weekend getaways to hot springs from Big Sur to Wilbur; and more bay cruises than Jack London could shake a whiskey bottle at.

They dined at restaurants ranging from upscale places like Olivier's and Boulevard to hip holes in the wall like Western Sushi and Dona Fa's Kitchen. They danced backstage at major concerts and enjoyed the best seats at Intersection for the Arts, Artists ' Video Annex, and Theatre Artaud.

Best of all, this lavish lifestyle didn't cost him a dime. Bryce tried to compensate for *The Dog*'s miserable wages with comps—coupons taken in trade for advertising. On many a Wednesday morning, after the latest issue had hit the stands, he'd call Tommy into his office, and slide open a battered filing cabinet. It was covered with glow-in-the-dark stars and had the words Magic Drawer painted across the black metal with Wite-Out. It looked like the title shot for the Twilight Zone.

"Good work this week, Tommy. You look like you could use a little shiatsu and maybe a good soak over at Kabuki Baths." He'd scratch his beard and reach in again. "Why don't you take these Bruce Hornsby tickets? You deserve it."

Bryce kept the comps locked up like bearer bonds, but once the drawer was open, he handed them out with the abandon of a Telegraph Avenue coupon hawker.

Concerts, shows, and lots of girls everywhere. Good times. At least until the New Economy came along and fucked up everything.

When Tommy first arrived in San Francisco in the late '80s, the coolest job in town was being a bike messenger. Yes, those daredevils who darted like dolphins through traffic on fat-tired bikes, radios and pagers bound in black leather and clipped tight to the straps of their messenger bags. Fueled by hydroponic proj and home-brewed bee pollen smoothies, they dressed in Bike Messenger Chic, a style that borrowed equally from *Mad Max* and *Flashdance*, post-punk studded rags with the sleeves cut off and baggy pants chopped below the knee to avoid sprocket tangles. Wrap-around shades and fingerless biking gloves, yes. Helmets, no.

Like warriors, they sauntered in and out of the most powerful law and business offices on the West Coast, leaving the receptionists all a-flutter with a playful wink and knowing smile.

Ten years later, however, the New Economy had reduced their status to just a notch above homeless, and with about as much chance of scoring office poon as Blind Johnny Ray. The new coolest job for young people? Being a Web Designer or, God help us, a Marketing Associate at a high-tech startup. To add insult to injury, these dweebs carried their laptops in messenger bags. *Designer messenger bags.*

In the New Economy, it was all about fortune. Fun was squeezed in on the weekends and often required expensive accessories, like Nike sneakers or a Gary Fisher mountain bike with a shock-absorber fork.

If bike messengers had it tough, indie journalists like Tommy fared only slightly better. He retained a semi-respectable level of prestige, thanks to comps, but rents soared and all the pretty girls were getting scooped up by the techno preppies in their starter BMWs and Acuras, guys with 401(k) plans and stock options, who could pay for a meal, with wine, without having to leaf through a dog-eared sheaf of grimy comps.

Worse still, some of these clowns were banking serious coin by writing. Writing! Tommy knew, because he'd overheard them talking about uploading their content as he poured champagne at their weddings and office parties.

And if these hacks could make a good dollar, what was Tommy waiting for? Maybe he'd fought the Good Fight long enough.

Maybe it was time to start getting paid.

Chapter 14

Tommy got back to TDM with less than two hours to spare before the meeting. He had to pass by Claude's office, but he was relieved to see the door closed and the lights off. But suddenly there was Tatanisha, blocking his path like a cop.

"It's about time!" She leaned in, arms crossed like a knot. "Claude is in a complete panic."

"Is that right?"

"What do you think? I told him you were at lunch!" Her arms relaxed. "What about the press release? You can be ready by three, then? Yes?"

Tommy screwed up his face, as if offended. "Have I ever let you down?"

"That's another conversation altogether. Listen, we have special guests coming to the meeting.? Yes, Hellebore & Crocell."

Tommy was impressed. "Wow. So that's who they're going with?"

"It would appear so. Now off you go, then. I wouldn't want to keep you from your duties." She shooed him away.

Tommy trotted to his cubicle. He digested the news as his computer slowly ground to life. Hellebore & Crocell was the kind of powerhouse public relations firm you called if your fast-food chain kills three kids with E. coli burgers. Or if your chemical plant explodes and wipes out the population of a village in East Kalimar. Or if one of your jetliners crashes into a swamp.

Big guns, Claude had said. No kidding.

Tommy stretched his fingers, opened the press release template, and started fiddling.

At *The Dog*, he'd had to read dozens of press releases every week, most of them mind-numbingly boring. When he shifted into contract work, he was shocked to learn that people actually got paid to write such tripe. Marketing and sales managers sweated each sentence, freaking out about message and buzzworthiness and the correct usage of semi-colons. Never mind that most of them couldn't manage a grammatical sentence more than seven words long.

They took days to fine-tune a press release. Days.

Tommy didn't get it. A decent release was brief, with the meat taking up two or three paragraphs. A couple hundred words, tops. Of course, it had to be attention-getting, captivating. Even a big player like TDM couldn't risk boring the recipient or presenting a confused message. Still, the process wasn't complicated. Start with the standard intro, get down the meat, tack on the boilerplate closer, and go grab a latte.

By quarter to two, Tommy had the core paragraphs down. Expressions of shock and disappointment, declarations of an internal investigation. But mere denials, undiluted, sounded defensive, and defensiveness indicated culpability, and they couldn't have that. By two o'clock, he'd shifted the focus toward the non-profit and do-gooder angle, playing up the Better World Initiative Program. BWIP was an actual program that TDM had created less to help anyone than to gain access to international development funds and qualify for significant tax benefits. Not to mention that it was public-relations gold.

By the third pass, TDM's exemplary global citizenship had taken center stage.

Redwood Shores, California—Today, executives of TransData Metasystems, Inc. (NASDAQ: TDMS) addressed rumors that the government of The Republic of B'Winki had employed TDM databases to target victims of the atrocities that occurred during the 1996-1997 civil war in the former Belgian colony.

TDM executives acknowledged that the democratically elected government had licensed and implemented TDM database systems, but for only the specified purpose of delivering public services, such as health, education, and social assistance programs.

"We would be very disheartened if our technology was somehow subverted to such a dark and sinister purpose," _____ stated. She further pointed out that this misuse violated not only the terms of the license agreement, but the humanitarian principles that TDM has championed since its founding.

"As expressed by our Better World Initiative Program (BWIP), TDM is dedicated to supporting non-profit and non-governmental agencies that are dedicated to positive change in the world," _____ added.

Through BWIP, TDM provides free database licenses to qualifying organizations; system integration and other services are provided at discounted rates. Hundreds of organizations have benefited from the

program, including notable NGOs such as The International Freedom Fund, Global Conscience, Blue Oceans, and Save the Dolphins.

Tommy liked it. The reader associated TDM not with genocide but with dolphins splashing in a blue ocean.

Tommy had just touched up the closing boilerplate when a harried Claude slipped into his cubicle and half-sat on the flatbed scanner, knocking the cover loose. His cardigan was disheveled, the sleeves uneven and bunched up.

“Sorry, sorry.” He slid away from the scanner. “Tatanisha said you had the release ready? Why haven’t I seen it yet?”

Good old Tatanisha. “Just wanted to give it one more pass. Here you go.” Tommy hit Print and in a second the release was humming out of his laser printer.

Claude plucked up each sheet as it slid out, hot and fresh. He bit his lower lip as he read it. “We’ll have to modify the quotes, of course.”

Tommy shrugged. “They’re just placeholders.”

“Not bad, Tommy, considering the short notice.” He flipped back to the first page. “Why do you say ‘rumors’ here?”

Tommy didn’t know. “That, well, I thought it might be smart to, uh, be proactive. Take the offensive.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, instead of waiting for them to break the story, we could break it ourselves. Make them have to respond. Plus, if we say rumors, that sets up skepticism from the get-go.” Tommy surprised himself. That actually sounded like a plan.

Claude nodded. “Good idea. Seize control of the public perception. It’s out of our hands now, of course, but I can suggest it. Let’s go with this for now. Email it to Tatanisha so she can get it into the packets.”

“Okay, will do.”

Claude peeked outside Tommy’s cubicle. “You’ve heard that we’re bringing in Hellebore & Crocell?”

“Sure.”

“This meeting probably won’t amount to much, just a bunch of ass sniffing.”

“Sure.” What was Claude getting at?

“But this is our chance to shine, if you know what I mean.” Claude winked. “Key people from Hellebore & Crocell will be there and, well, it wouldn’t hurt to make a good impression.”

Tommy shifted in his seat. “Sure, of course. A good impression.”

“Don’t misunderstand me. TDM is great, but we always have to keep an eye open for new opportunities.”

“I understand.” Tommy shrugged. He wanted Claude to go away.

Claude nodded and looked distant for a moment, as if plunged in deep thought. Suddenly he straightened and popped onto his feet. “Great. Let’s meet outside the Strawberry Fields conference room at five to three. Sounds good?”

“Sounds good.”

Claude speed-walked away toward his office. Tommy checked his cell phone. He still had time to make a couple of calls.

Chapter 15

As usual, Nurse Steve's phone rang at the most inconvenient moment possible. He had just finished transferring a post-op patient from gurney to bed, successfully navigating the tubes and wires, when (oh joy) the patient's urinary catheter popped loose. The tube danced around, spraying across Steve's smock before he could grab it and pinch off the flow.

Right then, his son-of-a-bitch phone rang.

He used his free hand to shut it off.

Steve did a quick change on the catheter and the Foley bag, but left the mess for the nurse assistants to clean up. Gesturing to his wet smock, he announced he was taking his break early. No one complained.

But then his path was blocked by Simon Murphy, another nurse and constant source of irritation. "Not in the mood right now, Simon."

"Come on, Steven," Simon grinned. "I was just about to say, I didn't know the forecast called for showers!"

Steve thrust a middle finger in his face and pushed past him.

Ten minutes later, all cleaned up, he checked his messages. A man's voice: "I'm trying to reach Bertha Higgins. I think maybe I got the wrong number." Bertha Higgins was the code new clients were told to use when making first contact.

Steve rode the elevator down to the street level, his heartbeat quickening with each floor. He practically ran to the café on the corner, which had a payphone in working order. Steve hoped this new client was connected to the last; maybe this job would have as much potential. For years, he'd been sniping medical records for a hundred bucks here, two hundred bucks there. Sometimes just as a favor.

But a few days earlier, a new client had given him a very tough assignment for five grand. Five grand. He couldn't get over it. Five thousand dollars. They'd even paid ten percent in advance, and hinted at the potential for more work in the future. Steve had already started shopping for a new racing bicycle, the Bianchi of his dreams.

Maybe this new job would be just as lucrative.

An old-fashioned bell chimed as he pushed through the café door. Steve waved to the barista and headed straight for the payphone. Two young mothers in Lycra exercise outfits occupied the nearest table, sipping tea and chewing madeleines. Their toddlers napped in strollers with fat knobby tires and spring-loaded hoods and brake cables. Were they going to the playground or running in the Paris-Dakar road rally?

Steve retrieved the number from his cell and punched it into the payphone. The handset was heavy and the metal spiral of the cable rubbed against his arm, catching and pulling the tiny hairs. He used a phone card for which he'd paid cash in the Mission. A prosecutor would be hard pressed to connect a wrong number to a cell phone with an anonymous call from a payphone. One couldn't be too careful.

"This is Tommy Delacroix. Hello?"

"First rule: no names."

The other caller cleared his voice. "Journalists always protect their sources."

Shit. A journalist. Steve deflated a little. Just another crap job. "Sure they do. So how can I help you?"

"I just need to confirm someone's diagnosis. Not even a diagnosis, really. An existing condition."

"Should be easy enough. You got a social on the guy?"

"Excuse me?"

Steve sighed. Amateurs. "A social security number. So I know I got the right fucking guy?" He looked up. The young mothers were glaring at him. He waved and turned his head the other way.

"Um, no. Can you manage with just a name?"

"Maybe."

Silence.

"Hello?" Steve asked.

"Yes?"

"Are you going to give me a name or what?"

"Well, I thought you said no names."

Steve rubbed his temple. "I meant my name. It'd be awfully hard to do my job without his name, don't you think?" Idiot.

“Look, pal. I haven’t done this before, so a little patience, if you don’t mind.”

“Whatever.” Steve pulled an advertising postcard—a giant bottle of vodka dancing with a hot bikini blonde on a beach—from the display next to the phone. The model looked like one of the young mothers.

“John Raymond Watters. Two T’s.”

Steve scratched the name onto the back of the vodka ad. “John with an H, right?”

“Right. J-O-H-N.”

“Any particular diagnosis you’re interested in?”

“Yes. He’s blind and I just need to know the nature of his blindness. You know, is it the kind that’s irreparable, could his eyesight come back by itself. . .”

“I think I understand what ‘nature of his blindness’ means.” Steve folded the card twice and slipped it into his back pocket. “You know the going rate, right?” Of course he wouldn’t.

Another troubling silence. “Yeah, about that. I heard you work in trade?”

These journalists were the worst. Like Steve should risk his job and nursing license for a free dinner at Olivier’s, alcoholic beverage not included. “What kind of trade are you talking about? Like how many blow jobs you’ll have to give me?”

“I was thinking—Excuse me?!”

There was a banging sound. Steve turned around. The young mothers were getting up to leave. The brunette glared at him. He smiled but her glare didn’t soften.

“I don’t work in trade anymore.”

“Really? I was told. . . Look, you got someone special in your life, right? How about a nice weekend up in Napa for two? A quaint little bed-and-breakfast just outside Yountville. Sound good? I can even throw in a hot air balloon ride, complete with complimentary champagne.”

Steve sighed. “Mmmmm, no. I don’t think so. How about this for a trade? I get your information and you give me two one-hundred dollar bills?”

Silence. Steve half-hoped the guy would give up. But then again, it was easy money. The job wouldn’t take an hour on the computer. The local hospital IT systems had more back doors than a Home Depot.

“Look, man. This is coming out of my own pocket. I’m not asking for too much, you know? It’s not like I need photocopies or X-rays or anything. Just a verbal from you. Two hundred dollars? Come on.”

Steve thought about it. “One hundred then. Cash, up front.” Steve arranged an anonymous transfer that night at the Ground Zero Café on Haight Street. He made it sound like someone would be watching, so the client had better not try anything cute.

After hanging up, Steve went to the counter and bought a couple of madeleines.

As he walked back to the hospital and chewed on the soft bread, Steve kicked himself for backing down on the price. Why even help this guy? He had his hands full with the five grand gig.

So far, it was proving to be his most challenging project ever. For starters, the subject’s name was not unique. There were enough records on Charles Claibourne to fill a truck. A history of high blood pressure, cardiac issues ranging from heart congestion to bypass surgery, all culminating in a series of debilitating strokes. The poor asshole was still alive, more vegetable than man in an upscale nursing home in Laurel Heights.

But his client didn’t care about that Charles Claibourne; they were interested in the son. And so far, Junior’s medical history looked a lot less intriguing. The usual vaccinations throughout childhood. A broken tibia in 1979 from playing lacrosse, a hairline fracture. Then nothing.

Of course, there had to be something, or they wouldn’t be looking. Five grand indicated a lot of certainty. They had knowledge; they needed the documentation.

Why? None of Steve’s business, and if he wanted more work, he’d keep it that way.

He climbed the hospital steps, his head swimming with visions of a new life flush with five-thousand-dollar payoffs, a new life with no snooty young mothers, no lame-ass comments from Simon, and no leaky catheters.

Chapter 16

The meeting was moved at the last minute from Strawberry Fields to Yosemite. All the conference rooms at TDM were named after great thinkers, national parks, and Beatles songs. Tommy assumed the names were supposed to unleash the workers' untapped reserves of creativity and collective genius.

Tommy was happy about the move. Despite the promising name, Strawberry Fields was a drab, windowless room. True, the walls were adorned with Warhol-esque silkscreens of the Fab Four with their handlebar mustaches and Sgt. Pepper epaulets, but the gray fluorescent lighting washed all the brilliance out of the psychedelic colors. Ten minutes in there, and Tommy felt washed out, too.

Yosemite, on the other hand, was a chapel-like space with a solid wall of twenty-foot- high windows that curved outward toward the sun-dappled branches of a stand of young redwood trees. The conference table was a polished slab of oak encircled by thirty or more black leather chairs worthy of a Bond villain. The recessed lighting was soft and subdued, punctuated by halogen spots that struck the wood grain into shades of burning gold.

Yosemite was the sort of room, Tommy imagined, where the Trilateral Commission met to decide the fate of international markets and to greenlight Third World invasions.

Claude and Tatanisha were waiting outside when Tommy arrived, their casual demeanor betrayed by Claude's foot tapping and Tatanisha's tensed jaw. Inside, they sat in their usual formation: Claude in the middle with Tommy and Tatanisha on either side. Information packets emblazoned with the company's teal and slate logo were arrayed on the table like placemats.

The only people Tommy didn't recognize were two men and a woman, standing in a tight cluster. The woman had her back to the room, but from the way she filled her slacks, that was just fine by Tommy. He did his best not to stare.

Claude nudged him and jerked his head toward the three strangers. "The Hellebore & Crocell contingent."

"Ah."

Tommy flipped through the packet, nervous to see his press release only three pages down. Less than thirty minutes before, it had shined with undeniable brilliance, but now he saw only warts. The semi-colon seemed pretentious, the mark of an amateur. And Jesus H. Christ, he'd used 'dedicated' twice in the same sentence.

He wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Then Nigel and his team burst in, all wearing dark suits but no ties, as was the executive fashion at TDM. They took their places at the head of the table but did not sit down.

The chattering stopped and everyone took their seats. The Hellebore & Crocell team sat directly across from Tommy.

Nigel looked around, his bony beak scanning like a periscope. "Everybody here, then? Right. Let's get started. First, as most of you know, we've engaged the venerable firm of Hellebore & Crocell to guide us through the current, um, predicament, shall we call it? Sally, would you be so kind as to introduce your team to the others?"

The woman stood up and started speaking, but everything she said after her name was lost to Tommy. She was Sally Mayfield, vice president of something or other at Hellebore & Crocell; the men with her were Dan and Bill, or maybe Bob.

Sally's skin was a glowing tan, her hair a honey blonde with golden highlights that danced in the halogen beams. She looked like a cover girl from a natural health magazine; not tarted up with glaring lipstick and heavy mascara, but healthy and sun-kissed. Freckles danced over her nose like wildflowers on an April hillside. As she spoke, her gaze moved from face to face, as if she had a special message for each and every person in the room. When she looked at Tommy, her eyes flashed emerald.

She finished and sat down.

Nigel, still standing, leaned forward, knuckles pressing into the table. "Thanks so much, Sally. I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say we're looking forward to working with you. Now then, I'd like to start by. . ."

Nigel's eyes moved to the glass wall that faced the lobby, and everyone's eyes followed.

Outside, Eli Larson himself and his entourage—lawyers, assistants, young female protégées with geeky glasses—marched toward Yosemite like an Armani

war council. As if one entity, the phalanx halted a few yards short of the glass. Only Eli continued. He stuck his head in the door like a school principal.

Nigel smiled. “Well, ‘ello there, Eli!”

“Sorry, Nigel, I don’t mean to interrupt.” He looked around the room with playful chagrin. “I was hoping to get in a few words before you started.”

“Of course, Eli. Do come in.”

Say the name ‘Eli’ in Silicon Valley and everyone knew whom you meant. The visionary who saw, years before anyone else, the essential role that databases would play in driving dynamic Web content. The righteous rebel who took on IBM and beat back Microsoft. The eccentric who had earned the nickname ‘Eli the Red’ when he had a perfect replica of a Viking ship, right down to the chemical composition of the paint used on the shields, hand-built from designs derived from actual vessels.

A man both reviled and admired, often in the same breath.

Most TDM employees never got to see Eli in the flesh, yet this was the second time that Tommy had found himself within pie-throwing range. The first time was right after he’d started, at the annual Alliance Partners conference in San Jose. One morning, Claude dispatched him to the Executive Breakfast, the big event where Eli got up close and personal with top executives from dozens of select multinational companies.

Eli’s was an imposing presence, six-foot-something with burning red hair, along with the ruddy complexion of a sailor but the groomed look of the hyper-wealthy, every hair in his tight beard trimmed with microscopic precision, and nary a speck of dandruff visible on his charcoal suit coat.

Eli had rambled on about how e-commerce and online business transactions would revolutionize the economy and society. Devastating, yes, but also rife with lucrative potential for those with the guts and vision to seize the day. In short, a creative repackaging of the usual crisis-equals-opportunity bullshit that business executives had been spooning out for years.

As he wound his way around the tables like a dinner theater magician, Tommy couldn’t help comparing Eli’s net worth with his own. Eli was reportedly worth six billion-with-a-B dollars; Tommy could have scraped up five-thousand-with-a-T dollars, maybe six, including some bonds his grandfather had left him. In other words, Eli had him beat by a ratio of a million to one. That is, for every quarter that Tommy had ever given Johnny, Eli could have cut him a check for \$250,000. A quarter of a million dollars.

Son of a bitch.

“Thanks, Nigel.” Eli stepped into Yosemite. The light took on a reddish glow, as if his hair and the wood grain and the sunlight coming through the redwoods had converged into an energetic harmony. He spoke without a microphone, but his voice resonated with perfect clarity throughout the room.

“I want to thank all of you, including our new friends from Hellebore & Crocell, for coming together to work on this issue. In our twenty-year history, TDM has faced many challenges and threats, but we have always emerged victorious and stronger.”

With one hand in his coat pocket and the other dancing before him, he seemed as casual as any co-worker telling a story by the water cooler.

“That record is comforting, isn’t it? Yet that is precisely why this moment of all moments is the most crucial. Our adversaries are hoping that we are complacent, overconfident, relaxed. I urge you to disappoint them. You might think this is just a little bad publicity, something that will go away by itself, perhaps taking a few points off our stock price with it.”

Eli flashed a pained smile; the room chuckled on cue.

“That may indeed be the case, but for all we know—today, right now—this deceptively small threat may contain the seeds of our undoing. These are competitive times, and we must not permit our adversaries a single advantage.”

He held both hands in front of his chest, as if pushing against a large ball.

“We must always press forward, on the offensive, and never allow ourselves to fall into a defensive position. If nature teaches us anything, it’s that the defensive position is a losing one.”

This last line sounded canned; Tommy wondered how long Eli had been waiting to use it. At the same time, Tommy remembered talking to Claude about being proactive and taking the offensive.

Eli dipped his head thoughtfully and nodded. “Well, I’ve already taken up too much of your time, even if I am the one ultimately paying for it.” Another round of polite chuckling rose up. “Nigel, thank you for indulging me.”

“Thank you, Eli.” Nigel leaned forward to shake Eli’s hand. Eli then slipped out the door and disappeared stage left with his entourage.

“Right then, let’s start off with some background on the B’Winki project.” He clicked a button on the table, and the lights dimmed. A large projection screen

unfurled against the far wall. He opened his laptop and fiddled with the keyboard, but nothing happened.

“Um, Jack. . . ” he said, and one of his assistants sprang into action. The lights came up.

While Jack messed with the laptop and the cables, Tommy glanced at Sally Mayfield, who was focused on the information packet.

She whispered something to the man next to her, who in turn whispered something to Nigel. Nigel glanced around the table until his eyes fell on Tommy. He whispered something back. Sally leaned forward and Nigel pointed at Tommy.

Sally looked at Tommy.

The look was unlike any he’d ever gotten from a woman. From anyone. Less a look than an appraisal, a registration, a capture of information. Tommy fought the urge to squirm.

Then the logo brightened on the screen, and the lights dimmed again.

“Thank you very much, Jack. Let’s get back to it, shall we?”

The presentation started, and immediately challenged Tommy’s ability to remain conscious. The history of the B’Winki negotiations, installation locations, a timeline, planned future expansions.

Yawn.

The lights came back up. Nigel stood and blinked his eyes. “We’re running a bit late, so let’s just go ahead and turn the meeting over to Sally.”

As if by some unseen cue, a third of the table rose and filed out of the room, including Tatanisha. Claude tapped Tommy on the wrist and made a shooing gesture with his fingers.

“The rest of the meeting is confidential,” he whispered.

Tommy grabbed his packet and hurried after Tatanisha.

They rode the elevator together back up to CorpComm.

Tommy attempted small talk. “That was something, huh? Eli showing up and all.”

Tatanisha smiled. “Yes, and what did you think of blondie in there, hmm? You couldn’t take your eyes off her skinny behind.”

Tommy feigned shock. “Surely I never behaved in so unprofessional a manner.”

Tatanisha shook her head and clucked her tongue.

From the elevator, Tommy detoured into the men's room—the tacos were catching up to him—and grabbed the first open stall. Even the restrooms were designed in the teal and slate colors of the TDM brand.

Squatting in the subdued light, Tommy flipped through the packet. Once again, his darkest thoughts about the wastefulness of Corporate America were confirmed.

The packet was thick with a whole bunch of nothing, all destined for the recycling bin. Did anyone need a copy of the slides if the presentation was on the network? The maps of B'Winki added nothing. Tucked into the back, behind a sheaf of email reports, Tommy found a project overview with content he might be able to reuse. The scope of the centralized Social Services Delivery System (SSDS), how it was designed to deliver government services. Blah, blah, blah.

It all added up to a pound of tree flesh wasted just so the attendees could walk away with something substantial, so they could all feel productive.

Tommy sighed and flipped the packet shut, when the phrase ‘tribal affiliation’ jumped off one of the flickering pages. He leafed back until he found it, several pages deep into the email printouts.

The context was a postscript from an initial email, which had been shoved backwards by the chain of responses, each line indented with seven >‘s like a road construction sign. The main message was a brief status update from Leopold Stoller, the TDM project leader in B'Winki, to Hans Manfredi, the head of the regional professional services division.

It was a good thing Tommy was sitting down.

“P.S.: I have not heard back regarding our other concerns. The situation is increasingly tense. Arthur discovered portions of printouts that list citizens by tribal affiliation and physical address. We did not design these reports, and more troubling still is the fact that someone dropped the related tables from the database. Clearly they are trying to hide something. The project has already exceeded the originally stated scope. Since the kickoff, we have suspected the SSDS was a cover for another purpose, a suspicion we believe is now confirmed. Before contacting either UN or Belgian/US embassies, please advise so we can exit in advance of any military action.”

Tommy almost dropped his packet.

They'd known. Leopold Stoller had seen it coming months before a single drop of blood was shed.

They'd known. The sons of bitches had known, and not done a damned thing to stop it. They hadn't called the UN. They hadn't called anybody.

What do you mean 'they,' white man? Who do you work for? Who signs your paychecks?

Tommy's stomach tightened like a fist. He wanted to throw up.

Fucking databases.

Carrie's Nike curse was coming true. She'd told him about the staff copywriter who had to handle the big Nike scandal when that hit. Now Tommy wondered if that writer had responded the same way.

Fucking sneakers.

Chapter 17

On Tommy's last day at *The Weekly Watch Dog*, Carrie gave him a small going away present, a postcard-sized Pot-Shot by Ashleigh Brilliant in a wooden frame:

I HAVE ABANDONED
MY SEARCH FOR TRUTH, AND AM NOW LOOKING
FOR A GOOD FANTASY

Since learning about his plans to quit, Carrie had been short-tempered and surly, accusing him of selling out, abandoning the Good Fight, and turning into a yuppie. What really bothered her, Tommy believed, was that he was abandoning her. After nine years of working together, they were the last of their *Dog* generation, the rest having moved on to better paying jobs or grad schools or whole new careers in the New Economy. With Tommy gone, Carrie would be alone, the professional equivalent of a spinster.

Over a final post-printing beer at the Hotel Utah, Tommy snapped. “Enough of this bullshit! You are such a fucking hypocrite, you know that? Weren’t you the one hungering for the prestigious CNN job? Not exactly charity work, is it?”

“Hey, at least that’s journalism! At least that’s helping inform the people!”

“Oh Sweet Jesus! Inform the people? Now who’s looking for a good fantasy?”

Tommy thought that would shut her up, but no, Carrie wasn’t close to done. Her eyes narrowed and her shoulders sank. She glared at him like all three witches from Macbeth compressed into one. For a moment, he was actually afraid.

When she spoke, her voice was so soft he had to lean in to hear her.

“You don’t get it, Tommy. I’m sure at Nike right now, there’s some writer just like you, someone who thought he’d landed the cake job at the hip sneaker company. He thought he had it made, just like you. But what happened? Turned out Nike was just another heartless corporation fucking people over, and guess who had to defend the monsters?”

She held his gaze and nodded with a disturbing certainty. Tommy tried to look away but couldn’t break the spell.

“That’s where you’re heading, Tommy. Just like the Nike writer, bailing out your corporate masters. Maybe sooner than you think.”

In the early 1990s, Nike had been the quintessentially cool company with the harmless product and hippest associations, flying high on Michael Jordan’s endorsements and ideal product placement in hit films like *Forrest Gump*. Employees strolled the lush Beaverton, Oregon, campus, sipping cappuccinos dusted with organic nutmeg.

Then the scandal broke. Turned out that the ultra-cool footwear was made in Third World factories where (surprise, surprise) the employees suffered long hours, trapped in a cycle of virtual slavery. Nike claimed they neither owned nor managed the factories; they merely contracted manufacturers to make their shoes.

Not good enough, critics claimed. That sort of business was one thing coming from Royal Dutch Shell or ExxonMobil; Nike was supposed to be different. With their clout, they could demand improved working conditions.

Boycotts followed, but the financial impact on the company was difficult to gauge, since most of the boycotters probably couldn’t have afforded Nike products in the first place. One thing was certain: the company’s cool image had been forever tarnished.

Carrie set down her pint on the bar and shook her head. “You think you’re so cool, Tommy, but before you know what hit you, you’re gonna wake up on the wrong side of history.”

And dammit, she was right.

Chapter 18

Tommy scanned through the rest of the emails in the packet, but there was nothing else, no other mention of Leopold Stoller's suspicions.

What was that email doing in there? It was like a bloody handprint on an otherwise sanitized crime scene. Tatanisha had put the packets together, but who had given her those emails? Claude?

None of that mattered. What did matter was that someone else was going to notice, and they were going to come back to wipe that handprint clean.

Tommy had to move.

He finished up and left the stall. Be cool. Just act like you always do. Lost in thought. Thinking about work.

One of the Web guys came in as he was washing up. "Dude!"

"Hey."

"Dude!" He stared at Tommy from the mirror. "Dude, are you feeling okay? You look awful."

"Uh yeah, you know. Roach coach tacos for lunch."

Tommy pushed through the door and tried to walk casually back to his cubicle. He felt top heavy, like he was carrying a futon on his shoulders and his feet had shrunk to pinpoints. He remembered Carlotta's yoga breathing techniques. In through the nose, out through the mouth, nice and slow.

He felt better.

The copy machine was out of the question, situated as it was directly across from Tatanisha's cubicle, which she presently occupied, cell phone glued to her ear. She nodded as he passed her desk.

Tommy ducked into his cubicle and woke up his computer. He lifted the scanner cover and pressed Stoller's email against the glass plate. He checked the aisle and pressed Scan.

The machine shook as the light bar came to life and clicked into its bearings. Keeping one hand on the materials, he turned his eyes away as the bright light

flashed beneath the glass.

Then he heard Claude's voice.

Tommy peeked out. Claude was talking to Tatanisha. She handed over her packet.

Tommy glanced at his monitor, where the image of the email appeared in staggered chunks. He clicked Accept and Save. He pulled the packet off the scanner, flipped it shut, and tossed it on top of his In-basket.

Without thinking, he grabbed a photo from his corkboard and slapped it into the scanner and scanned it, too. The image of the email disappeared, replaced by Tommy and Carlotta posing on a Lake Tahoe pier, the jagged line of Mount Tallac behind them. He left the photo in the scanner, just in case.

Just in case of what?

And then Claude was looming over the half wall of his cubicle.

"Hey, Tom."

"Hey. How was the rest of the meeting?"

"Oh, fine. Fine. Say, did you grab one of those packets by any chance? I need to get it back."

Tommy shrugged and pulled it out of his In-basket. "Sure, here you go. Everything okay?"

Claude's brow was a knot of tension, like a fist pushing through from the other side. "Oh, sure. We just ran a little short. You know."

"No problem. About the Web site, I'm still waiting on Phil's edits. As soon as I can make the revisions, I'll upload the new version."

Claude nodded and stepped back, clutching Tatanisha's and Tommy's packets against his chest like schoolbooks. Without another word, he was gone.

Tommy let out his breath and rubbed his eyes. But there was no time to relax. He'd saved the scan to a Zip disk, but he couldn't leave it there. No trace could be left behind. He couldn't email it to himself. All that was monitored. He wasn't sure how, but a few months earlier a guy in Sales had been canned for having pornography on his computer.

Phil Jensen appeared at his half wall.

"Hey, Tommy!" Phil held up a copy of this white paper. "Here are my hard copy notes, and here is an updated soft copy." He produced a blue and gray Zip disk.

“Sorry, but I had to add some new diagrams.”

Great, Tommy thought. He’d probably doubled the size of the file, which was already a bear to download from the Web site.

“No problem, Phil. Let’s take a look.” Tommy popped the Zip disk into a spare drive and found the files. He scrolled past the new diagrams. “Not too bad.” He tapped the marked-up hard copy. And I just need to make these changes, and that’s it? We’re really done?”

Phil chuckled. “I promise! No more changes. Sorry it took me so long.”

“No problem, Phil, I got it covered.” And as Tommy stared into the mandala of a system diagram, he realized that he did. Have it covered, that is. In a single flash of insight, he realized how to hide the email scan in a place where anybody could get it but nobody could find it.

Chapter 19

Marta had never liked Harlan Briggs.

Mr. Claibourne spent almost half an hour on the phone with the man, resurrecting the NAHA and tracking down Chief Mark Hawk. The chief was somewhere in Wyoming, officiating at a sweat lodge for mining executives, and therefore incommunicado until Monday at the earliest. But Briggs was confident that the Chief would be happy to reprise his role as NAHA spokesman, especially if the honorarium was anything like the last time.

The plan Briggs and Mr. Claibourne hammered out was simple and direct.

Stoneflag would publicly offer full accommodations to the University archaeologists.

The NAHA would immediately mount a massive protest and media campaign against the dig. Demonstrators, evening news, sacred grounds, ancient heritage, ancestral lands. The whole bit.

After a few days of tension between the NAHA and the University, Stoneflag would play peacemaker by stepping in with a compromise: the University would be allowed to remove the shell mound for off-site examination under the watchful eye of observers from the NAHA.

The NAHA would reject this plan before the University can respond.

Stoneflag then sweetens the deal by providing a permanent exhibit of Native American artifacts in the lobby of the new building. A Celebration of San Francisco's Proud Native American History, or some such.

That last part might be hard to sell to Stoneflag, but Mr. Claibourne would remind them of the generous tax breaks and cultural grants for which they'd be eligible, and which over time would amortize the losses caused by current delays. The lobby would be transformed from wasted space into a revenue stream.

Briggs whistled. "Yer a genius, Charlie. Plain and simple, son of a bitch genius."

Marta could sense Mr. Claibourne's cringe through the double oak doors. He hated being called Charlie. Not that his voice betrayed anything. "I have my

moments, Harlan.”

Of course, all the ideas came from Mr. Claibourne. Briggs brought nothing to the table but the logistics of the NAHA’s involvement.

“Finding enough bodies for a real demonstration might be tough, Charlie. It’s not like the NAHA has any actual members.”

Mr. Claibourne reminded him of the earlier casino deal. Surely Briggs could call in some favors from that tribe.

After the call, Marta went in with her notes.

“I don’t trust him, sir.”

Mr. Claibourne smiled. “Neither do I, but we’re the ones calling the shots here. The NAHA would be convenient but they’re not absolutely necessary. Briggs wants to impress us, he wants to play with the big boys. He knows we’ll send him packing if he tries anything cute.”

Marta crossed her arms. Harlan Briggs reminded her of her ex-husband, Hector. Boisterous and full of himself, always looking for an angle. “He’s crude and unmannered.”

“Ms. Sandoval, please! I too wish we could be more selective when it comes to our associates, but . . .” He shifted in his seat. “Let me worry about Briggs. How’s the presentation coming along?”

Marta dropped her stance. “I’ll have a draft in half an hour.”

Fifteen minutes later, she returned to his office with a printout of the PowerPoint slides.

Mr. Claibourne flipped through the pages, uh-huh-ing and hmm-hmm-ing.

“This is great, Ms. Sandoval. A great start.” He flipped to a page and stabbed his finger on a slide. “Let’s not come out and say we want to legitimize the NAHA’s role. We can say that in the meeting, but let’s keep it out of any documents. Say instead that we’re choosing them because they, um, have a history of representing Native American interests. Something like that.”

Marta nodded. It was past five. She watched as Mr. Claibourne marked other changes with a red pen. After an eternity, he handed it back to her.

“Really good so far, Ms. Sandoval. Bring it back to me after you make those revisions.”

Mr. Claibourne’s desk phone rang. Line 6 was flashing, the extension reserved for top clients. Marta picked up the handset and pressed the button.

“Charles Claibourne’s office. . . One moment, please.” She pressed Hold. “It’s Mr. Garfield from the mayor’s office. Are you here?”

Mr. Claibourne shrugged. “Why not? Could be good news.”

Marta pressed a button. “Please hold for Charles Claibourne.” She pressed Hold again and handed the phone to her boss. He sat in silence for a solid ten count, then nodded for Marta to open the line.

“Jack? Tell me something I want to hear. . . ”

Marta picked up the presentation and left.

Back at her desk, she picked up her cell phone and pressed the hot key for home. Her mother picked up after one ring with a whispered “Hello.”

“Mama, it’s Marta. How’s Isabel?”

“*Mija!* She’s fine, she’s sleeping. She looks much better, more relaxed. Are you coming home soon?”

Marta sent a silent Thank You to God. “Mama, I need to work a little bit late, maybe seven or eight”

“Don’t worry. We’re fine. I’m making soup, lots of vegetables. Don’t worry.”

Marta ended the call and relaxed a little. Isabel was doing better. Dr. Spungen had managed to put Mama at ease. The old doctor could be very soothing.

The intercom rang and Mr. Claibourne called her in. He was standing by his clothes closet on the far side of the sitting area, another compartment concealed by the wood paneling. A dozen suits and pressed white shirts hung at the ready, still draped in the protective paper from the cleaners.

“Ms. Sandoval, that was good news, after all. Very good news. Our friend Mr. Garfield reports that Sanjay Byakod of Deskware Systems has agreed to host a fund-raising dinner.” He glanced back at her, then dropped his eyes. “I’m afraid, however, that I will have to leave you on your own with the Stoneflag presentation. I have to rush down to Deskware for a pow-wow.”

“Tonight?” Marta was surprised. Of course, this meant she’d get home earlier than she thought. Without Mr. Claibourne’s further input, there was only so much she could do.

“Right now. Garfield is sending a car.” He pulled out a dark suit and laid it across the arm of one of the sitting chairs. “This could be a major boost in the campaign. We need all the traction we can get in the Valley.”

He pulled out a tan suit and looked it over. “They’re thinking twenty-five hundred a plate. For the dinner. They only wanted to ask a thousand, can you believe it? We could get three grand but twenty-five was as far as I could push them. For now.” He draped a tie against a shirt. “Do these go together okay?”

Marta shook her head. “Go with the light yellow tie and a blue shirt. There’s one all the way to the left.”

“Right, okay.” He pulled out a yellow tie speckled with a tiny fleur-de-lis pattern. “Okay, great. Thanks.”

“And sir, if I may. . . The tan suit would be more appropriate. Casual but elegant.”

Without hesitation, Mr. Claibourne put back the dark suit. “Of course. You’re right.”

Marta took a deep breath. “Congratulations, sir. Do you really think the mayor could win the Senate?”

Mr. Claibourne smiled. “If it was just Nor-Cal, most definitely. But we’ll need to spend a lot to get LA and San Diego on board. If tonight’s meeting is successful, it looks like we’ll have the funds to do it.”

Marta nodded.

“Ever think about Washington, Ms. Sandoval? DC, I mean. As a place to live?”

“Sir?”

He shrugged. “Just thinking out loud.”

Marta knew that, in the past, the Claibourne’s had had greater influence in Washington. One of Mr. Claibourne’s uncles had been a congressman, a great uncle on his mother’s side had been an undersecretary in the Eisenhower administration, and still another relative had sat on the Federal Court of Appeals. For the past generation, however, their sphere of influence had shrunk back to its traditional base in Northern California.

Was that why Mr. Claibourne had broken his father’s unwritten rule against taking political sides?

As if in response, Mr. Claibourne said, “I can see a new Claibourne office right on K Street. It’s a new world in Washington, Ms. Sandoval. The lobbyists are calling the shots now.” He tore the laundry paper off a clean shirt. “We ride into town with the mayor and get right into the game.”

He looked over at Marta, with that little-boy look he had sometimes.

“And by we, I mean to include you, Marta. We won’t be able to do it without you.”

Marta froze, forgetting for a moment whether to breathe in or out. Mr. Claibourne had just called her Marta and told her she might need to move to Washington. What about her mother, Lupe and the boys? What about Isabel and Lazlo? How could she ever leave them?

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I may be putting the cart before the horse. I shouldn’t speculate out loud. K Street is years away, if at all. I certainly didn’t mean to alarm you. I know you’re concerned about your sister.”

“It’s all right, sir.” Marta forced a smile. “It’s been a long week and we still have a lot of work to do. Stoneflag. . .”

He nodded. “Yes, yes. There’s that. Just add the changes. We can smooth out the rest on Monday, first thing.”

“Yes, sir.” Marta thought about the time. She’d be able to leave before seven.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get ready.” Mr. Claibourne glanced at the door to his private bathroom.

“Yes, sir.” Marta left, closing the doors behind her. Dazed, she sat at her desk, found where she’d left off, and got back to work.

Chapter 20

Tommy was fifteen minutes late getting to the Ground Zero Café in the Lower Haight, the place where he was supposed to leave the money—in a book, of all places—for Nurse Steve. Tommy had asked Carlotta to meet him there, forgetting Steve's admonitions about coming alone.

Too late now. He'd have to wing it.

Tommy kept circling the block. There was absolutely no parking. The detailed facades of the arrayed Edwardian houses evoked both turn-of-the-century ornate and Sixties psychedelic, but offered no sympathy. Indeed, each presented a red sign that warned of the direst consequences if he dared to block any one of their garages.

Friday nights were date nights. He and Carlotta would meet after work for dinner out, something cheap and good. Carlotta knew all the best deals in town. They they'd catch drinks or a movie or live music, whatever struck their fancy. Tonight was a rare summer evening in the city, warm and clear, perfect for picking a neighborhood and wandering through its bars, bookstores, and cafés.

The Ground Zero Café and the Lower Haight were as good a place to start as any.

With each unsuccessful pass around the block, Tommy grew more frantic; Carlotta didn't like to be kept waiting. Not because she was difficult or a bitch or a control freak, but because it pushed her Abandonment button and sent her into a tailspin of despair. She had meditated and yoga-ed herself into sufficient self-awareness, but Tommy still did his best to avoid situations likely to push that button. Not just for her sake, but to keep the whole evening from going down in flames before dinner.

Tommy saw red brake lights and waited for the car to pull out. A minute later, the Jetta was parked and Tommy was jogging the block-and-a-half down Haight Street to the café. He slalomed around some neo-hippie panhandlers and excessively tattooed couples chatting on the sidewalk. He almost crashed into a stroller that was painted a flat black and hard to see in the deepening twilight.

Through the café window, Tommy saw Carlotta sitting at a table and flipping through a large art book, a cartoon-scale coffee cup in front of her. He relaxed; no buttons had been pushed. She smiled softly, her olive skin glowing with yogic serenity. Her brown eyes, large and almond-shaped, were at once relaxed and alert. Sweeping bows of dark hair framed her face like parentheses. As Tommy watched, she tucked one bow behind her ear.

And the sensation hit him again: the Carlotta Effect. The world of ordinary concerns collapsed like sand castle walls under a rising tide. There was no Johnny, no miracles in the park, no Claude, no crisis in B'Winki. Warmth and lightness filled Tommy and he knew, again, what it meant to love someone and to be happy.

He pulled the door open and went in. Carlotta looked up and smiled, bright teeth pressing through full plum-colored lips. God, she was beautiful. Tommy did all he could to keep from dissolving into nothingness.

They'd met at a wedding. She was a guest and Tommy was bartending, done up like a cartoon penguin in a black vest and bow tie.

The speeches had been made, first dances danced, bouquet and garter both thrown to the masses, and as much cake smeared across the floor as lodged in the guests' bellies. Tommy kept busy pouring consolation champagne for the older single women.

(And champagne was all he poured. As a wedding bartender, Tommy was a consummate professional and subject to an unwritten code that strictly prohibited taking advantage of vulnerable female guests, no matter how low the neckline or brazen the proposition. On the other hand, there was wiggle room: phone numbers could be accepted but never requested.)

Carlotta was different. She wasn't drunk when she sidled barefoot up to the bar, strappy heels dangling from her left hand like caught fish. "You got any white wine back there? This klutz crashed right into me." She gestured to the white lace along the top of her dress. A splash of red wine.

"Will champagne work?" Tommy dipped a napkin into a glass and handed it to her.

"We'll just have to find out." She dabbed and dabbed, her neck craned, trying to see around her own chin. "Is it coming out?" She leaned toward Tommy over the folding bar, arching her torso forward and lifting the material away from her neckline.

“Um. . . well. . . ” Tommy wondered if this were not just another, however highly creative, come-on. But he leaned in anyway. Her fragrance, something vanilla, crept up on him like a drug. Carlotta’s hair was still long then, dark waves woven with micro-pearls and baby’s breath. She looked like a raven-haired temptress from the cover of a romance novel. Tommy glanced at her empty ring finger. All signals go.

“Well?” she asked.

“...”

“Shit, it better come out. This dress is totally vintage. Like 1956.”

“I think it’s coming out. A little pink-ish. Hard to tell in this light. Was it expensive?”

“Are you kidding? This is a Helen Rose, the same designer who made Grace Kelly’s wedding dress. It’s worth a couple of thousand, easily.” She leaned in and whispered, “But I picked it up cheap in a Fresno thrift shop. They had no idea what they had. The dry cleaning cost more than the dress.”

Carlotta launched into a mile-a-minute story about how her mother had been an estate buyer, her actual job being to attend estate sales, using only her eye and experience to detect and assess potential value.

Mom had passed all the tricks of the trade down to her daughters. Even though Carlotta had gone into corporate event planning—handling the arrangements for trade shows, conferences, off-site meetings, everything—she compulsively haunted garage and thrift shops. Carlotta ran a little side business, reselling whatever bargains she found. Her secret fantasy was to run her own antique shop, with an emphasis on vintage formal wear.

Tommy would soon see Carlotta’s talents first-hand. For one of their early dates, they spent a Saturday going to garage sales. He’d looked forward to lazily foraging through knick-knacks, posters, and cheap cookware. But Carlotta blew past the first three sales they saw.

“Aren’t we going to stop?” Tommy asked.

Carlotta shook her head. “Old kids’ toys, clothes, bedspreads. No thank you.”

Tommy squinted into the side view mirror. “You can see all that from here?”

“Can’t you?”

When they finally did stop, it was for a Shaker sideboard whose authenticity Carlotta detected from across three lanes of traffic.

The wedding may have given them a chance to meet, but it was their shared love for bargain-hunting and general frugality—Tommy's out of necessity, hers out of instinct—that bound them together as a couple.

Carlotta was different from the other women Tommy had met. He was smitten and, after he bragged that he hadn't paid to get into a movie in ten years, thanks to *The Dog*, she was smitten too.

Tommy must have popped and poured twenty bottles of champagne during that first conversation. But then came that inevitable silence where somebody has to make a move or they'd never see each other again. He was dying to get her number, but that damned unwritten code.

Carlotta looked around and shifted her shoes to her other hand. "Well, I'd better be getting back to my friends."

"I think the stain will come out okay."

"Yes. Thanks so much for your help."

"My pleasure." When Carlotta turned to go, he blurted out, "Wait."

She waited.

"Look," he whispered. "I really enjoyed meeting you, but. . . This will sound weird, but I can't ask you for your number. It's kind of against the rules."

She smiled. "The rules, huh? And those supersede the Bill of Rights?"

"I know, I know. But look, just because I can't ask you for your number, there's nothing preventing you from. . . ahem."

"Oh, so you mean, I can ask you for your number?"

"Yes!"

"Well, those must be very important rules, then. Bye!" She turned and sashayed away, putting a little oomph into it. Tommy doubted that dress looked half as good in 1956.

He grabbed a ready glass of champagne and ran after her. "Miss, miss! You forgot this!"

She took the glass. "Why, thank you so very much!"

They were practically on the dance floor. He cleared his throat. "I don't suppose I could get your phone number?"

Carlotta cupped her ear. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

What the hell. He didn't have that many catering gigs left in him anyway. "I SAID, COULD I PLEASE GET—"

Carlotta jumped to him and cupped her hand over his mouth. "Okay okay okay! You got a pen on you, Mr. Bartender Journalist?"

"Hey, Sweetie!"

"Hey, you!" Tommy met her halfway in a kiss and sat down.

"This place is great! I love it."

"Well, I thought you might." The Ground Zero Café was decorated in Cold War kitsch, everything from photos of mushroom clouds to movie posters for *Fail Safe*, *On The Beach*, and *Panic in the Year Zero!* Model kits of Fifties-era missiles and fighter jets dangled from the ceiling.

"These chrome and formica tables are too much! And they're authentic." Carlotta ran her fingers across the glitter-embedded top and along the chrome edges.

"Really? Personally, I'm taken by the historical figurines." Tommy pointed to the bobble heads of Khrushchev, Castro, and JFK on a shelf above the register.

Carlotta rolled her eyes. "Men!" She sipped her latte. "Listen, sweetie, I need to talk to you about something."

"Huh?"

"My parents are coming out to Napa again, so. . ." Her parents meant her mother and her stepfather, Burt, and that meant dinner out—, probably Perry's on Union Street, Burt's favorite place. Burt and Stephanie traveled to Napa at least twice a year, always pausing in the city just long enough to try, again, to talk Tommy and Carlotta into having a big wedding back East.

Carlotta read Tommy's look. "I'm sorry, it's just one dinner. Tuesday night?"

Tommy smiled. "It's fine. They're your parents and they're coming to town. Of course we have to see them."

"You're the best fiancé ever!" She leaned across the Formica and kissed him. "So how was your day? How was that big meeting you told me about?"

"It was nothing. Just a rehash of the project. I got kicked out before they talked about the super-confidential stuff." He was dying to tell her about the email, but he couldn't. Not until he figured out what the hell he was going to do. "Anyway, they're turning it over to some big PR firm. Hellebore & Crocell."

Carlotta made a face. "They're big all right. What was that other thing you wanted to talk about? You had to come into the city to help someone?"

Johnny. "Oh, that. That's a long story best told over cold beer and Thai food."

Carlotta smiled. "The suspense is killing me. Well, let's go then, I'm starving." She took a big gulp of her latte.

"No!"

"What's the matter?"

"I mean, what's the hurry?" Tommy needed more time. He'd almost forgotten about the drop for Nurse Steve. How could he explain that to Carlotta? Later. "You're still drinking your latte and you know, I just sat down."

"But I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since before yoga class."

"Don't worry. The place is close, right around the corner. And besides, you haven't told me about your day yet."

Carlotta's eyes narrowed. "All right. What's going on, Tommy?"

"What do you mean?"

She sighed and counted on her fingers. "One, you never ask me about my day. Two, when I do tell you about my day, your eyes totally glaze over. Third, there's something you're not telling me, and I'm really getting annoyed." She crossed her arms. "So, out with it. What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on. Okay. . . There is something, but it's complicated."

"I'm sure."

"I'll explain everything over dinner, I promise. But right now, I just want to relax here for a few minutes longer."

Carlotta sat back, her arms still in a knot. "Fine, Tommy, but it had better be good."

Tommy leaned back. How could he explain that he was about to stand up, walk over to the bookcase near the window, place five twenty-dollar bills in a book, and then walk away?

Carlotta saved him the trouble. She stood up.

"Where are you going?" Had he upset her? Had buttons been pushed?

"To the bathroom." She pulled her purse onto her shoulder. "Be right back."

The moment Carlotta was out of sight, Tommy sprang to his feet and sidled over to the bookcase. The arrangement with Nurse Steve was to leave the money in the rightmost book on the top shelf. Not, in Tommy's opinion, the most inconspicuous move.

Tommy pretended to browse, then stood on his toes to reach the book, a thick trade paperback. *The Angler's Bible*, battered and faded. The cover illustration showed the close-up of a trout bucking out of the water, hook in mouth. In the background, an ecstatic fisherman pulled back on his pole. The captions promised to teach the novice everything A-to-Z about fishing.

Time to act.

Tommy scanned the other café patrons. Mostly couples, a trio of raver chicks with choppy haircuts and patterned stockings, a Filipino guy in a Niners hoodie nursing a pint of stout. No one paying attention to Tommy.

He held the book open with one hand and slipped the other into his pocket. He palmed the five twenties. He hesitated. A hundred bucks was a hundred bucks, the sort of sum he should talk to Carlotta about first. He'd been telling himself that he could get reimbursed by *The Dog*.

No matter. Spending this kind of money unilaterally had the stink of betrayal. Every extra dime was supposed to go toward the down payment on a place of their own. The idea was to come back from their honeymoon to a new home. Both were making a lot of sacrifices, saving wherever possible. They were supposed to be working together.

Too late. Tommy had made his deal with Nurse Steve.

The bills were crisp and dry against his palm. He drew his hand from his pocket and pressed the cash against the back of the book. With a quick sliding motion, he slipped the bills between the pages and closed the book. Smooth. His shoulders relaxed; he hadn't realized how tensed up he'd gotten. He reached up and slid the book back into place.

Done. As for Carlotta, he promised himself that he would explain how he'd had to pay for the illegally obtained medical records of a blind homeless man who, by the way, had regained his eyesight that very morning through the miraculous ministrations of a would-be messiah in a monogrammed bathrobe in Golden Gate Park.

Surely she would understand.

“Tommy, what was that?” Carlotta was right there, her brow knitted with confusion. “What did you put in that book? Was that money?”

Tommy blurted something about replacing a bookmark. They had to get out of there. Steve had said to come alone, and here Tommy was arguing with his fiancée right in front of the drop.

He grabbed Carlotta by the wrist. “You’ve got all your stuff. Great. Let’s go.”

“But my latte.”

“I’ll buy you another one. Come on.” She wouldn’t budge. Tommy looked hard into her eyes. “Trust me on this. Please.”

The Filipino guy in the Niners hoodie got up and strode over to the bookcase. He pulled the book down, grabbed the money, and shoved his hands deep into the uni-pocket of the sweatshirt. He brushed past them, glaring at Tommy and shaking his head in disgust.

“Goddamned amateurs!” He spat the words. Tommy almost jumped at him, but then he saw the guy’s pants. Blue hospital scrubs. Nurse Steve.

“Oh, thank God!”

Carlotta jerked her wrist free and crossed her arms. “What the fuck is going on, Tommy?” Carlotta almost never dropped the F-bomb, so Tommy knew she had to be really upset.

No matter. Steve had the money. Tommy relaxed. “I’m sorry. I’ll explain everything. Let’s sit down. Remember that long story I told you about? Well. . .”

He told Carlotta everything about Johnny. Even the part about the Elvis chant.

Chapter 21

Twenty minutes before seven, Marta finished the revisions to the presentation. She ran the spellchecker one last time and told herself she'd done all that she could. She saved her work and closed the open applications one by one, clicking on the little square in the corner.

As the computer powered down, she pulled the 24-hour cell phone from its charger and turned it on. This was the phone to which after-hours calls were forwarded. A special phone number for special clients.

Marta turned off her monitor and got up to make her usual end-of-day rounds. This included walking through her and Mr. Claibourne's office to turn off all the lights, computers, and printers, and shutting and locking the windows. Just to make sure nothing was out of place or in disarray.

At Mr. Claibourne's desk, she picked up some dry leaves, recently fallen from the ficus. Then she saw the pharmacy bag. She picked it up, thinking that he'd taken the medicine with him. But no. The little orange bottle was still inside.

She couldn't call him. He'd still be at Deskware and wouldn't want to be interrupted.

Marta considered arranging for a driver to run it out to Mr. Claibourne's house, but she couldn't risk the driver seeing the pills. Not these pills, anyway. Part of her job was to protect Mr. Claibourne's privacy.

She considered running it out herself. She normally took BART home to Glen Park, a fifteen- minute ride. Going to Mr. Claibourne's house first would mean a long cab ride out to Presidio Heights and a still longer one home.

On any other night, this is exactly what she would do.

But not tonight. Marta had to get home to Isabel. She thought about the dull ache in her back and the tightness of her shoes. Her feet always swelled up at the end of a long day.

Enough for today. She slid the medicine into the top drawer of Mr. Claibourne's desk and turned off his reading light. Back at her desk, she pulled on a light sweater and double-checked the 24-hour cell phone. She clicked off the last light.

If she hurried, she could still catch the 7:10 train.

Chapter 22

In the two years they'd been together, Carlotta had given Tommy a lot of looks, and he'd learned to interpret most of them. There were the basics, like Happy and Sad, and then the more challenging varieties, like Missing My Dead Father and Irked But Trying To Hide It.

But Tommy had never seen anything like the look she was giving him now. Her mouth sagged, lips loose and slightly parted, which all suggested Stupefaction or Confusion. Yet her eyes were sharp, alert, and searching, which could mean Suspicious.

They faced each other, the cartoon coffee cup between them. Untouched and grown cold, the holes in the foamed milk had expanded and combined into lunar craters.

"So this Johnny is sort of a friend of yours from when you lived in Cole Valley?"

"Yes and no. He was just this homeless guy." Tommy shifted in his seat. He might as well have been sitting under a bare light bulb.

"But you talked to him and you helped him, so you must have liked him?" Carlotta nodded in the way people do when they want you to either confirm or deny what they're saying. "And he told you things about his life, and maybe you talked to him, too, about your life?"

"Put it that way, okay, sure, we were friends."

Carlotta put a warm hand on Tommy's. "Sweetie, it's only natural for you to want to help a friend. He called you and you wanted to help. What's wrong with that?"

"Really?"

Carlotta's eyes softened and her lips curled into a smile. "Yeah, really! It's kind of sweet. He must have felt very close to you if he reached out after all this time." She stroked his face. "It makes me feel close to you, too."

Tommy wanted to pinch himself. He couldn't be getting off this easily. He'd expected her to be angry or at least judgmental. His past was no secret, but

Carlotta had really known Tommy only as the emerging professional, and not the starving journalist who ran around with pie-throwing anarchists.

Tommy had never asked her to join him on Labor Day, when he used to volunteer for the Food Not Bombs protest in Golden Gate Park. For many Labor Days in a row, he'd woken up early and hoofed it down to the park entrance at Haight and Stanyan, where he tied on an apron and spooned out food to a long line of homeless men and women. Entire families sometimes. Twice he was ticketed by police for violating an ordinance that, behind all the legalisms, boiled down to a law against feeding the homeless in the park.

Since meeting Carlotta, however, Tommy hadn't volunteered once. That was his past, he told himself. The time had come to set aside childish things and jump into his future, which lay with Carlotta and TDM paychecks and a 401(k) plan.

Now, seeing Carlotta's positive reaction, he questioned that decision. Maybe it had been stupid to think that he couldn't make a decent paycheck and still fight the Good Fight. Was he ashamed of his past? Of Johnny? What was he trying to prove? And to whom?

Carlotta pulled away. She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms again.

"But there's one thing I don't understand, Tommy."

"Oh?" Back in the hot seat.

"I mean, it's very noble to pick up your friend and buy him lunch. But why doesn't it end there? Why this urgency to investigate his blindness?"

Tommy nodded. "I know, I know. It's crazy. A hundred dollars, but I really thought the guy would do it for some comps. I mean, Carrie said that was how he worked in the past."

"But why do you care? Why are you doing this for Carrie, anyway?"

Tommy detected a little extra bite on *Carrie*. Was Carlotta jealous? He could practically feel the Abandonment button twitching.

Carlotta continued, a manic edge to her voice. "It's just that, you knew this guy for how many years and never once tried to figure out his blindness or if he could be cured, but Carrie calls and you go running. . . ."

Tommy leaned forward and gripped Carlotta by the shoulders. "Carlotta. Darling. Sweetie. Love of my life. Light of my days. Someone I know, a friend, like you said, was blind and suddenly isn't blind anymore. I'm the curious type. I wonder what happened. That's all."

Carlotta nodded. "I understand, but—"

"I just want to know. I don't have to write a story for Carrie or anyone else."

Her mouth tightened. "A hundred dollars, Tommy? You didn't consult me."

"You're right, sweetie. I jumped the gun there. But I'll get the money back. Reimbursed."

"Oh, really? You swear?"

"One way or another!" Tommy sensed that she was softening. "Even if I have to break in and steal it back."

She smiled. "Oh, really?"

"Sure. Like Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible*, hanging from the ceiling by wires." He pried one hand loose from her crossed arms and kissed it like a French lover. "Come on, let's go get some Thai food."

On the way out, Carlotta surprised him. "It would be something, though, wouldn't it? I mean if this really was a miracle. Not some fluke."

Tommy shrugged and held the door for her. "Yeah, but let's face it. The odds favor the fluke."

Carlotta chuckled. "Isn't that a contradiction in terms? The odds favoring the fluke?"

Tommy shrugged. She was right. Just then his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He wrestled it out and saw RESTRICTED on the caller ID.

"Who is it?" Carlotta asked.

"Beats me." Tommy leaned into a doorway to get away from the street noise. "Hello? This is Tom Delacroix."

"Mr. Delacroix, this is Samantha Breuer, assistant to Ms. Sally Mayfield." The caller's voice had a gravelly sexiness, Ann Bancroft as Mrs. Robinson.

"Sally Mayfield?" Tommy said the name out of surprise. Carlotta's eyes widened.

"Yes sir. Of Hellebore & Crocell?"

"Of course. How may I be of service?" Tommy had learned to talk that way when he first started freelancing. One had to sound confident, professional, and subservient all at once.

"Sally would be like you to join her for lunch next week."

“Lunch would be great. How’s Monday sound?”

“Tuesday would be perfect.”

“Tuesday it is, then.” Tommy fought back a sigh. If she’d wanted Tuesday, why not just say so in the first place?

“Very good, Mr. Delacroix. Eleven-thirty at the Allez-Vous Restaurant. Do you know the place? On Mission by the Embarcadero?”

“Of course. Please give Sally my warmest regards, won’t you?”

The moment Tommy pressed the End button, Carlotta went wild.

“You’re having lunch with Sally Mayfield next week?”

“Uh, yeah. It would appear so.”

“You never told me you knew Sally Mayfield!”

Tommy shrugged. “Well, I just met her today. She was at the meeting. . .”

Carlotta shook her head. “You have no idea who she is, do you? She’s Sally Mayfield! She’s huge!”

“Well, I—”

“She’s not just huge, she’s gigantic. She was the keynote speaker at BayPress two years ago!” BayPress was a big annual PR convention. Tommy had never gone and prayed he’d never have to.

“I wonder what she wants with me.”

“Maybe she recognizes talent when she sees it. Did she see the press release you wrote? I’ll bet she Yahoo-ed all your press releases and liked what she saw.” Carlotta nodded, her eyes happy and wide. “Tommy, this could be a huge opportunity for you.”

Tommy had never heard Carlotta use the word ‘huge’ so many times so close together. “Maybe, but isn’t there a conflict of interest here, since I’m employed by one of her clients?” Tommy started walking towards the restaurant.

“Who knows? Who cares? Jesus, Tommy, can’t you just enjoy your accomplishments for once? Why do you always need to feel guilty? Why are you so afraid of success?”

“I’m not afraid of success!”

Carlotta shook her head. “That is so typical. Why do you think you let yourself waste away at that useless rag for so many years? You’ve always been a great

writer, but instead of trying to achieve your full potential, you preferred rewriting other people's personal ads. Thank God you finally saw the light!"

"Hmm." Tommy didn't like to think of his years at *The Dog* as 'wasted' but her overall point was right. He hadn't pursued his full potential.

Carlotta hooked her arm in his. "Look how far you've come. A couple of years ago you were writing press releases for free, just to build up your portfolio, then you got into TDM, and now you're having lunch with Sally Mayfield! I mean, hello!"

Tommy was about to say that Carlotta's connections had gotten him the TDM job, but he realized she was right. Connections or not, he still had to deliver the goods. No one was doing anyone any favors.

"Maybe you're right, maybe I have been afraid of success. A little leery. The idea sounds crazy, but maybe I don't trust it."

"Don't trust what? Success?"

"Yeah, like there's no free lunch. There's always a price."

Carlotta squeezed his arm and made a face. "You mean, like your soul or something?"

"I guess. Yeah, yeah, I know. Silly, right?"

They came to the restaurant. Carlotta put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Tommy, it's okay to be successful just because you're good at what you do. And if we're not working for success, then what are we working for?"

"I don't know. Nice furniture?"

Carlotta laughed and darted in for another kiss. "Let's eat! I'm starving."

Chapter 23

Sunday night.

Tommy entered the Paradise Lounge through the Eleventh Street door and climbed the stairs to the rooms set aside for poetry and pool. For a moment, familiar butterflies danced in his stomach, a flashback to the few occasions when he'd come here to read his own attempts at verse. He automatically calculated how many beers and games of pool the cash in his pocket could buy.

Tommy smiled. The money in his pocket tonight, unlike in the past, could buy a round for the whole room. His days of being broke were long gone.

Upstairs was a cloud of tobacco and clove smoke, plus the oversweet notes of spilled beer. Most of the light in the room came from the spotlights aimed at the small stage. Ample excess light bounced off the back wall to illuminate the small round tables that crowded the floor.

The place was packed. He should've come sooner.

Tommy found the sign-up sheet at the end of the bar. All the slots were filled but he quickly spotted the name, in the familiar, looping, uppercase scrawl that he'd hoped to find.

Greta Gdansk.

Earlier that evening, Tommy had been fidgeting on his sofa, failing to zone out with a rented video. Carlotta was off on an overnight Valley Grrrls! event in Half Moon Bay. Unmoored by distraction, Tommy's mind turned again and again to Johnny Ray, who wouldn't pick up or return his calls. Tommy assumed that he'd been less than diligent in charging the cell phone. Where was Johnny? What was he doing? And why hadn't Nurse Steve reported in yet?

Tommy wished that Carlotta were home. On Sundays, they usually cooked a big meal together, kicking around the kitchen for hours, snacking on cheese and olives, drinking wine, and talking about everything and anything.

Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. What had really happened in the park? The more Tommy thought about Johnny's story, the crazier it sounded. But something must have happened. Something. . .

There had to be other witnesses. Someone more reliable than Johnny and not so quick to attribute everything to an angel. Johnny had said there was a whole encampment. Where could Tommy begin, short of canvassing the homeless near the park?

A familiar tingle ran up his spine. He was getting close.

Tommy flipped through the rolodex in his skull. The first promising card—smudgy, frayed around the edges, and reeking of cannabis—belonged to his old anarchist pals from Pies Not Bombs. He wondered if they were still around. No doubt the New Economy had taken its toll on their ranks, banishing some to cheaper digs in Oakland, transforming others into espresso-sucking Web designers.

Then Tommy remembered Greta Gdansk, a locally renowned street poet he'd interviewed for *The Dog*'s occasional literary supplement.

Greta was what they used to call a 'street person' before the term became just another synonym for 'bum.' Colorfully dressed in her perennial Grateful Dead gypsy style, Greta would stand on random corners in the Haight and Mission, reciting her bits about street life in the magnificent city.

Quaint, perhaps, but once upon a time Robin Williams himself had been a street performer in San Francisco. Like Williams, who'd studied at Julliard, Greta had emerged from academia—, Columbia University, in fact.

Her early work earned her a place in *Twenty Young American Poets 1972*, no small honor. Unlike many working poets, Greta eschewed teaching as a career and instead devoted her life to chronicling life among the street people. She scraped by on random grants and chapbook sales at readings, street fairs, and local book stores. She was successful, if success can mean being widely published and never having to say you had a day job.

Of course, the Seventies were a long time gone. The Grateful Dead had moved to the wilds of Marin County and Robin Williams had become Mork from Ork and Mrs. Doubtfire. Greta's bright gypsy garb had faded into sooty rags, just as the colorful street people around her had devolved into the faceless homeless. Her bio photo in *Twenty Young American Poets 1972* showed a hardy Viking beauty, but over time she'd come to more closely resemble a chiseled Russian refugee, a psychedelic update of the Ellis Island stereotype. Squat, round, and kerchiefed.

The last time Tommy had seen her, her left leg had been encased in a bulky General Assistance brace, an old injury having developed into a chronic

condition. He remembered the awful scraping sound the brace had made as she dragged it across the floor.

Had Greta been in the park that night? If not, she might at least be able to direct Tommy to someone who had. But where to find her now? Tonight?

Open readings were her lifeblood, so Tommy hopped down to the corner market and grabbed the latest *Dog*. Standing on the corner, raked by the wispy tendrils of evening fog, he rifled through the Events listings. Nostalgia washed over him. The format had not changed that much over the years—the same fat, circus-poster typeface for the headings—but now the listings included Web sites and email addresses.

Being Sunday night, there were fewer readings than usual. Being San Francisco, that still meant at least a dozen were scheduled. As soon as Tommy saw the name of the club, he knew where to go.

Like every Sunday for the last ten years of so, most of the hardcore locals would be gathered upstairs at the Paradise Lounge.

Tommy checked the time. If he hurried, he could get there before it started.

Tommy scanned the crowd. He didn't see Greta, but she'd probably be at a table up front, her books on display. The room was too crowded to wander around, but things would thin out after the break. Half the audience was there to support a friend who was reading; they'd leave as soon as that duty was fulfilled.

Once upon a time, Tommy had been among the hopeful readers himself. Alas, remarkable as his writing talents were, they did not extend to verse. Sure, it looked easy, like anyone could go up there and, with the right inflection, make a Betty Crocker recipe sound like Ginsberg's best. But then Tommy came across the likes of David Lerner and Alan Kaufman and Kathleen Wood, the true poets who used to rule Café Babar and the Paradise. He'd slunk away in shame.

Tommy bought a beer and settled in. He'd find Greta during the break. Hopefully, she'd remember him. He'd given her a nice write-up.

The open reading portion started. Not a good night, like a special event for Poets from Hell. The regulars heckled the worst readers ("Too long!" "Next!"), prompting the emcee to remind them, in her kindergarten teacher voice, how hard it was to screw up the courage and read in public. Mercifully, the format limited each reader to one poem and one poem only.

Finally, Greta's name was called. Tommy had been right about her getting a table up front. Judging from the way she moved, her leg had gotten better. Much

better. In fact, she fairly leapt upon the stage. Her color was good and her leg brace nowhere in sight.

After so much bad poetry in so short a time, Tommy was ready for something good, and Greta seldom failed to deliver the goods. Her terse lines, unpretentious and unadorned, usually depicted a gritty street scene. A failed request for spare change, a circle of winos sharing a bottle of cheap wine, the sensation of booze in an empty belly. No sentimentality, no social message, no ennobling of the base. Only simple observations in simple language, the last line always hitting home like a haiku sucker punch.

She adjusted the mic stand to her short stature and calmed the crowd with her cool, unswerving gaze.

*it's here
stop escaping through the top
of the your skull, stop floating
nameless among the stars*

*this is the place
a plate of food for the hungry
a human hello for the faceless
a smile for the toll keeper*

*it's here
take a fistful of dirt
squeeze it through your fingers
let its broken glass cut you
let your blood feed the ground*

*it's here, this place—
try some*

*if it makes you choke,
learn to sip*

you're the one who's starving

The crowd remained silent, not sure if she had finished. The regulars exchanged blank and questioning stares. Even the emcee looked confused. This was hardly Greta's normal fare.

Greta liked it, though. She held her head erect with that I-know-I'm-good look on her face. But as the crowd failed to respond, her smugness sagged. Irritated, she repeated the last line. “You’re the one who’s starving!”

She jumped off the platform with a dancer’s grace. The emcee took the mic and announced the break, to be followed by the featured reader, some eco-warrior from Portland.

People moved off to take a leak, grab a drink, shoot some pool. A good portion grabbed their coats and headed for the stairs. The here-to-support-a-friend crowd.

Against the tide, Tommy pushed his way toward where Greta sat holding court at her usual table. Two stacks of chapbooks were fanned out. A napkin with magic-marker read: \$6 each 2/\$10.

The moment Tommy saw her up close, he knew. The leg, the healthy glow. Johnny’s words echoed in his soul.

You know these people, Tommy, you know them. The Rainbow Woman.

Of course.

“Hey, Greta. How’s it going?” Tommy picked up a chapbook, flipped the pages. She looked at him blankly, as if he were a salesman, but then her face brightened with recognition. “Young Mr. Delacroix. Tommy the D. How you been?”

“Good memory. That was a while ago, almost three years.” Tommy gestured with the chapbook and reached for his wallet. “Two for ten, huh? Sounds like a good deal.”

She accepted the two fives. Tommy grabbed a copy of the other chapbook.

“So, Tommy, still working at *The Dog*?”

“Nope, now I’m working for the Man! Bah-dum-CHEESH!” He mimed the rim shot. She didn’t laugh at the joke. Tommy wondered why he kept trying. “I got a day job at a tech company down on the Peninsula.”

“Sorry to hear it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Tommy shrugged and leaned in. “So, you seen Johnny Ray lately?”

Her eyes sharpened, then glanced away. “Johnny Ray? Not lately.”

“That’s funny, cuz he tells me he’s seen you.” Tommy leaned down and locked her gaze. “And I mean, with his own two eyes.”

She didn't blink. "That's so?"

"Yeah, that's so." He leaned back. "So, can I buy you a drink?"

She declined. Not that she'd given up drinking, she explained, but rather had stopped seeking oblivion.

"I don't want to be clouded any more, Tommy. I don't want to miss a single moment of the rushing energy that is life, that is being alive. My vision has been cleansed, restored, no less so than Johnny's physical vision." She paused to sign a chapbook for a buyer.

"So you were there that night, then?"

Greta smiled. "Tommy, you don't need to come on with the nasty cop attitude. And you already know all the answers, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know I was there. You knew it the moment you saw me. And you know what happened with Johnny, because he told you. Excuse me."

Another buyer, bills in hand. With practiced flair, Greta opened a chapbook and scrawled her name on the title page.

"I believe him. I do. It's just that, well, I'm not sure—"

"How much was fact and how much fantasy?" She chuckled. "I've been asking myself the same question, but then I look at my leg. Was it all a dream, those years of infections and braces? Of course, the Man healed more than my leg. That's just a side effect, really. Incidental to a more profound change."

Greta told him that The Man had been appearing in the park for years. She'd heard rumors about a mysterious figure who would come and go like an angel, but it had only been in the last year that she first saw him in the flesh. Since then, his appearances had become more common, although no one knew when or where to expect him.

"But you don't think he's really an angel, do you?"

"No, of course not."

"Really?"

"Really, Tommy. Angels don't have beard stubble. He has a beard, and you know how men shave their necks, trim along the bottom here?" She ran her fingers along her gullet. "He had stubble there. Razor burn. And sometimes a pimple or two."

“Sounds like you got a pretty close look.”

The stage brightened and the room lights dimmed. The break was over.

“Who is he, Greta?” Tommy watched her reaction—a sudden flush and tightening of her face—and he knew she knew. “What’s his name? You know him, don’t you?”

The emcee was back behind the mic, not five feet from Tommy.

“Come on, Greta. Tell me his name.”

Greta smiled. “Oh, come on now, Tommy. You know him better than I do.”

“What? Who?” What was she talking about?

“You need to go now.” Greta pushed Tommy’s chapbooks across the table.

“Don’t worry. I already signed them.”

Tommy looked up. The whole room was waiting for him to sit his ass down. He walked back to the bar and ordered a double tequila with a Red Stripe chaser.

He needed to collect himself. Regroup. Greta had confirmed Johnny’s story but opened up a dozen other mysteries. Whom did Tommy know better than she did? She must have meant Johnny, but it sounded like she meant The Man in the Park. And how long had this been going on without word leaking out?

Tommy corrected himself. Leaking out it was.

The eco-warrior started. Tommy couldn’t think over his amplified voice, so he retreated into the billiard room. The only players, two guys in beaters with crew cuts and beaters and lots of tattoo ink, looked at him briefly before returning to their focus to the physics problem presented by the balls on the green felt.

Tommy chose an empty booth with good light. He picked up one of the chapbooks. Greta’s monochromatic image smiled from the cover, her head wrapped in her trademark scarf, pirate style. He thumbed the book open to the title page with her autograph. She’d scrawled something else there. Tommy shifted the book around until he found a decent patch of light.

“The next thing Johnny asks you”

That was it. A fragment with no punctuation. The next thing he asks. . . what? Tommy checked the other chapbook. It, too, had more than an autograph.

“Say Yes!”

Chapter 24

You open your eyes.

The fog rakes your face, a thousand tiny tickles as the particles dance against your skin. The fog is not the dull nothing gray you remember from years before, but rather a billion specks of silver infused with light. The night is wonderful. Wonderful! You breathe in and feel the energy dancing all around you. This is the Planet, this is the Moment, this is Home.

But what are you doing on Eleventh Street? You know you're going to sleep in the park tonight—you know it—and you even found Sabrina, and are supposed to meet her by the Music Concourse. Yet here you are, the Tug having pulled you halfway across town.

You sense that you're close to the police station. You recognize the long, flat blocks and broad streets from when Tommy picked you up. The buildings have the same industrial purity and utter simplicity. It's beautiful. Everything is so beautiful. The emptiness reminds you of the desert, where God is always close by and there's no place to hide.

What few trees there are struggle against the bad air and oily runoff. Their branches are sparse and thin, their leaves dusted with soot. Each one is more like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree than the last. Yet they grip the soil and reach into the sky with a fierce enthusiasm.

"We are here," you hear them say. "We are here."

"Me, too," you whisper back. "Me, too!"

A man and a woman leave a bright Mexican restaurant. They huddle against the fog and try to hug and walk at the same time. The woman turns and leans against a signpost. She draws the man's face down into a kiss.

You look up and read the street sign: Kissling Street. You call out to the couple. "Hey, look. Look!" You point at the sign. "Kissling Street! KISS-ling Street!"

They veer away from you, trotting across Eleventh.

Some people will never get it, will never see the signs. You laugh—the signs!—but quickly correct the thought. If the pitiful Johnny Ray could get it, there's

hope for everyone. You look at the retreating couple and send them a blessing. You bathe them in warmth and light and say it out loud. “Bless you. Bless you both.”

Tug.

You continue down Eleventh Street. You know you are close, but close to what? No matter. For the last three days, the Tug has never been wrong, serving up hot soup from behind restaurants, leading you to warm places to sleep (an unlocked MUNI storage shack, plush with flattened cardboard shipping boxes, no less!), and offering up free paperback mysteries, stacked in a free box on the sidewalk, leftovers from a moving sale. You picked up a John D. MacDonald novel, the first book you’ve read with your own eyes in twenty-five years.

Everything you need is handed to you. You are a lily of the field!

At the light, you cross Folsom. Halfway down the block, the Tug halts you in your tracks.

You listen again. The shush of car tires on the fog-wet asphalt catches your attention and you turn. Across the street, a door opens, spilling yellow light across the sidewalk. Just as quickly, the door closes and the light is gone. A man stands there, illuminated only by the silver fog.

Tommy.

Instead of calling his name, you pull out the cell phone he gave you. You press and hold the number two key the way he showed you. After a moment, you hear his phone buzzing. As he wrestles it from his pocket, you cross the street at a blind angle.

Tommy stares into the display, his face illuminated in the greenish light.
“Johnny? Hello? Johnny?”

By now you are close behind him. “RIGHT HERE, BOSS!!”

Tommy jumps. His phone flies from his hand. By some magical reflex, you reach out and pluck it from the air.

“What the hell, Johnny!” Tommy is mad, but smiling, too.

“Hey, you gotta lighten up some. You know what they say. To enter the kingdom of heaven, ye must be as a little child.” You hold out his phone and he takes it.

“Oh yeah? Well, I nearly crapped my pants just now. Would that count?” Tommy shakes his head like a dog shaking off water. “Jesus H. Christ, you nearly gave me a heart attack. What are you doing down here anyway?”

You laugh. "I just do what I'm told."

Tommy glances back at the building. There's some kind of event upstairs, light and shadow dancing across the big factory windows. "Okay, then. So what now?"

"I don't know, Tommy. Are you ready?"

Tommy shakes his head and lets out a deep breath like he's been holding it for a long time. "Yes."

"Cool! Let's go to the park!"

Tommy sighs. "Right. The park. Of course."

Chapter 25

From the Paradise Lounge, Tommy and Johnny swung by his apartment so Tommy could change into the proper attire for spending the night in the park. An old overcoat and beat-up sneakers. While Johnny used the bathroom, Tommy grabbed a couple of Carlotta's sleeping bags, good goose down ones from REI, plus some rain ponchos for ground cover.

On the way to the park, they stopped at Safeway for hot drinks. Johnny got two peppermint teas—, one for himself and one for someone they were supposed to meet when they got to the park. Tommy got two large coffees; he didn't plan to sleep at all.

They parked right off Lincoln Way, as close to the park as Tommy could manage. Johnny led the way. The park was creepy at first, but after their eyes adjusted, their way was illuminated by the reliable San Francisco werelight, a soft 15-watt glow that illuminated everything but the deepest shadows.

At night, whenever the fog rose to a few hundred feet, the streets and houses and trees would glow with that soft, ethereal light. Tommy was familiar with this phenomenon, which was simply the result of the city lights bouncing back, diffused, by the fog. But understanding the cause made it no less magical.

They kept to the main boulevards before cutting over to the Music Concourse, a large sunken area with benches and fountains and a big bandshell at one end. The place wasn't empty. Shadows moved on the periphery; night joggers and strolling lovers. The De Young Museum, a low- slung Spanish Mission design, glowed a dream-like pink. Tommy felt like he was on another planet.

Johnny tapped his shoulder. "There she is." He pointed to the Academy of Sciences, a block-shaped museum opposite the De Young. A woman sat alone at the top of the steps, hugging a large duffel bag on her lap.

As they got closer, Johnny called out, "Sabrina!"

The woman waved and stood, pulling herself up on crutches, the metal kind with round arm cuffs.

Johnny picked up her bag. "I got this." He held out his offering of hot tea.

Sabrina brightened. “For me? How sweet!” She popped off the cap, lifting the steaming cup to her nose. Her eyes closed in delight.

Johnny pointed to Tommy, who was still out of breath from trying to keep up. “Sabrina, I think you remember Tommy.”

“Of course, from Cole Valley! I haven’t seen you around in a long time.” She took Tommy’s hand.

Who was this woman?

“I, uh, moved to the Mission a couple of years ago.” Tommy shuffled through his memories of Cole Valley—Alpha Market, Tassajara Café, Finnegan’s Wake—but nothing about Sabrina shook loose. Johnny and maybe three other men were the only homeless people that he could recall.

“Come on.” Johnny hooked her bag over his shoulder and helped her down the steps. Tommy couldn’t tell what disability she had, just that her right side seemed unsteady and weak.

“There’s a ramp over here. It’s easier.” As she spun to point the way, a grimy fish-shaped purse swung into sight, and Tommy remembered her.

Sabrina.

The last time Tommy had seen her, that purse was shiny and new, quilted from an iridescent fabric that shifted colors with the angle of light. Sabrina had been shinier, too, and a very active member of the Blind Johnny Ray Benevolence Society. He remembered her from Spinelli’s and the N-Judah streetcar stop at Carl and Cole. He remembered her laughing blue eyes and bright smile and eternal Dorothy Hamill bob cut.

A few years older than Tommy, Sabrina had struck him as the quintessential independent woman, a professional career-type living on her own. A graphic artist? Yes, they’d talked about it once, waiting for the N-Judah. She’d always worn a herringbone overcoat.

Tommy didn’t dare ask how she’d wound up on the streets. She probably wouldn’t want to say. Fallen professionals carried the greatest amount of shame. Probably a serious illness compounded by a lack of health insurance. Or maybe the benefits had run out. Unable to work, disability and unemployment checks wouldn’t cover all the medical bills, let alone rent and utilities. Was she too ashamed to call on her family? Did she have any family? Maybe they weren’t in such great shape themselves. Same with her friends, some of whom she probably leaned on until she ran out of their good graces. Sooner or later, she’d wound up

here, darkened by a coat of grime and waiting for Johnny Ray, a man she'd once fed quarters and leftover quiche.

Tommy shivered. The streets were no place for a woman. He hoped Johnny was protecting her.

Johnny led them around to the side of the Academy of Sciences, veering off into the clearing next to the Shakespeare Garden. The streetlights from Middle Drive flickered through the trees.

Tommy blinked his eyes. The clearing was wall-to-wall people, a lumpy quilt. Most everyone was lying down, but here and there clusters of two and three people sat up, sharing cigarettes and whispering conversation. Hint of booze and the rank mist of unwashed humanity mingled with the scents of eucalyptus and damp earth.

Tommy was surprised that the camp had escaped detection. Cops usually focused on exactly this kind of tourist-rich area.

Johnny pointed across the clearing. "Usually some space over on that side."

"Okay."

Sabrina fidgeted. As Tommy wondered how she'd navigate the lumpy quilt, Johnny scooped her up into her arms. "Get her crutches and all, would you, Tommy?"

"Sure." Tommy clasped both sleeping bags under one arm, and took the crutches with his free hand. They were heavier than they looked.

They found space by the low brick wall of the Shakespeare Garden. Tommy spread out the ponchos and the sleeping bags. Johnny immediately offered his bag to Sabrina and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Sabrina settled the matter by unzipping the bag and laying it flat so they could both use it. She pulled a thick blanket from her duffel. They huddled together beneath it.

Tommy was astonished by how quickly they fell asleep. He tucked his legs into his bag, but stayed upright, leaning against the wall. He was fully caffeinated and ready to wait up all night.

Chapter 26

There were moments where she forgot to breathe.

Marta sat in the hospital corridor, waiting for Dr. Spungen. She forced her lungs to expand and contract, a poor imitation of breathing. The effort exhausted her.

In. Out.

Marta shifted in the chair, her bottom slipping around the molded plastic. She planted her feet squarely on the floor and leaned forward to settle herself. Her white exercise shoes were speckled with dried blood. Watery pink blobs, like amoeba seen through a microscope, punctuated with ruddy brown drips. Isabel's blood.

In. Out.

A flash in the corner of her eye: a door opening at the end of the corridor. Marta took a moment to recognize Dr. Spungen, alien in khaki slacks and a blue Oxford shirt. Docksider shoes. He adjusted a navy blue coat draped over his arm. His hair, wet and combed back, looked like blades of grass cast in iron.

“Marta.”

“Doctor.”

“Come on.” He extended his hand. “Let’s get some coffee. We both need it.”

Marta shook her head. “No, no coffee.”

Dr. Spungen shrugged and sat in the next chair. “Where’s your mother?”

“With Isabel, of course.”

“She should go home.” He glanced at the wall clock. Marta glanced, too. Just past one in the morning. “There’s no reason for her to be here. Isabel will sleep well into the morning.”

Marta smiled. “You know my mother will never leave Isabel’s side, not for one second. She’s almost thirty, but she’s still like the baby of the family, you know?” Marta ran her tongue across her teeth, wishing she could brush. “Having us close by will be good for her. It should be good for us, too.”

Dr. Spungen leaned back and passed his fingers through his hair. “I’m not worried about Isabel. She lost a lot of blood, but she is responding very well to treatment. She should be fine in a few days. A week.”

Around nine, only a few hours and a thousand years earlier, Isabel cried out from her room. Her water had broken in earnest. But when Marta and Mama pulled back the sheets, the water was pink and the odor had a coppery edge. Lupe called Dr. Spungen.

“Call 911. Get her to University Medical. I’ll meet you there.”

The ambulance arrived in eight minutes. The dripping pink had become a bright red. The paramedics balked at the instructions for University Medical. SF General was closer. But Dr. Spungen barked at them over Marta’s cell phone, and they obeyed, administering a clotting agent and something to slow the contractions.

“And Lazlo?” Marta asked.

Dr. Spungen leaned forward. “He’s in the Prenatal ICU. They’re doing everything they can for him.”

Marta regarded the old doctor. His face sagged like pale rubber in the fluorescent light. “Don’t make me drag every last detail out of you, Doctor. We’re both too tired. Just tell me.” She knew what he was going to say, but she needed to hear for herself.

Dr. Spungen nodded and sighed. A surrender. “You know, hope is a funny thing. It’s always there, which is good, and I want Isabel and all of you to have hope. But the kind of hope you should have. That is, not false hope.”

“Doctor?”

“I’m sorry. It’s been a long night.” He shifted and put his arm around Marta’s shoulders, a gesture rendered awkward by the fixed distance between the plastic sets. “Lazlo is up against some very harsh odds.”

Marta pulled away. “Doctor, please! Just tell me, is he going to make it or not?”

“Not likely, no.” Dr. Spungen met her eyes. “There’s always hope and it’s never over until it’s over, but based on my personal experience and clinical statistics, no. Lazlo is not going to survive. A few days, a week at the outside.”

Marta felt dizzy.

“I’m sorry, but you wanted to hear it plain and straight.”

“But why? He is only eight weeks premature! You said so yourself.”

“Yes, I know but”

“But what?!”

“That’s not the issue here. This wasn’t a premature birth, it was a late miscarriage. The placenta was malformed, severely compromised. Hardly holding together at all. Frankly, I don’t understand how she didn’t miscarry months ago.”

Marta rubbed at her eyes. Dr. Spungen offered a plastic pack of tissues. “I don’t understand.”

Dr. Spungen’s face tightened. “I have to say, I don’t either. The damage to the placenta seemed to be on the cellular level. It appeared normal on the sonograms, but in reality it was barely binding to the uterine wall, hence the hemorrhaging.” He rubbed his head like a tired child. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Marta could barely listen. She thought about Lazlo and her conflicting intuitions. The dark one was coming true. What about her visions of Lazlo playing in the yard with his cousins?

Dr. Spungen continued. “I know Isabel was in the Army. She served in Desert Storm.”

Marta wiped her cheeks. “Yes, it’s where she met her husband, Diego. He’s still in the Army. South Korea now. So what?”

“A higher incidence of still births and birth defects has been documented among Gulf War veterans. No one really knows why. Toxic exposure, of course, but exactly what kind, how to treat it. . . ”

Marta said nothing. She wanted to ask if Isabel would be able to have more children, or if she’d be barren. Like Marta. Over the years, Marta had come to accept her condition, devoting herself to her work and to making a safe and comfortable home for her nephews and someday, she hoped, her grandnephews and grandnieces. But that acceptance had come only after years of great pain. Her husband’s parting words still echoed as clearly as the day he’d left.

Why would any man stay with a worthless, barren woman like you?

“Marta? Are you alright?”

Marta nodded. “Yes, yes. I’m sorry.” Marta told herself that Diego was a better man and more deserving of children than Hector. Any man was better than Hector.

“Are you sure I can’t buy you a cup of coffee?” Dr. Spungen rubbed her shoulder gently, the way her father used to.

She wanted to fold and cry in the old doctor’s arms. But there was no time for that. She swallowed hard and straightened her back. “Thank you, but no. I have things I have to take care of.”

Her thoughts turned to Diego and the phone call she had to make. Marta wondered if he’d be able to get back home before his only son died.

Chapter 27

A winding brick road surrounded by green fields lying fallow. Split-rail fences, rolling hills, wildflowers, and tall grass, all Technicolor brilliant. In the near distance, stands of lush trees hug creek beds. Tommy bounces down the road, almost dancing. Johnny's sheepskin coat hangs on him like an overcoat on a child; his hands disappear into the sleeves. He's blindfolded with a dirty rag, as if playing Gloucester in King Lear, yet he can still see everything perfectly.

As Tommy crests a hilltop, he sees the magnificent city below. San Francisco/Oz, gleaming and sparkling. He runs toward the Emerald City but is suddenly blocked by a glass barrier that extends infinitely in all directions. Helpless, he stares at his unattainable destination. He sees that the glass wall contains tiny, multi-color fragments, iridescent shreds each containing an image with rainbow holographic highlights.

On this shred: eight-year old Tommy and his father hike together in the Appalachians. Here Tommy sits with Johnny on his bench in the Cole Valley sun. Here Tommy holds Carlotta's hand at her grandmother's funeral. And here Tommy types in his cubicle, his head bouncing to headphone music.

And here... and here... and here...

Random moments drifting like plastic snow in a snow globe.

Yes, a voice says. It's all here. There is no other place. There is no other time. There is no you. There is no me...

Tommy snapped awake. He blinked his eyes into focus. Above him, dark tree branches fragmented the sky, tattered pink fog slipping by. Clusters of stars appeared and disappeared as the holes in the fog moved across the night.

Who am I? Where am I?

Oh yeah. The park. That sprawling mass next to him was Johnny and Sabrina.

His stomach ached from the coffee. A metallic tightness clenched his skull. What was he doing here? Tommy had this thing called a job, and tomorrow was Monday, a very important day for people who had jobs, especially if they wanted to keep them.

What time was it? He checked his coat pocket for his cell phone, and briefly panicked when he couldn't find it. Of course, he'd left it in his other coat, the leather jacket he'd worn to the Paradise Lounge, and which was presently draped over a chair in his kitchen.

A sour litany paraded through his brain. To get to work by nine, he'd have to leave his apartment by 8:15. To leave by 8:15, he'd have to be showered and dressed. That was thirty minutes, minimum, which meant getting home by . . . Backwards the sequence ran until Tommy estimated that he'd have to leave the park by 6:30 to be absolutely, one-hundred percent safe.

Forget about it. Relax.

Tommy tried Carlotta's yoga breathing and stretched in place. The sleeping bag was plenty warm. With no sign of daylight and no sound of traffic coming from Lincoln Way, it couldn't be later than two or three.

It's okay. Relax.

The werelight bathed the clearing in a soft glow, brighter than Tommy would have expected. He realized that he wasn't the only one awake. The quilt stirred and shifted. People everywhere seemed to be rousing, coughing, standing up, and stretching.

Then Tommy heard it. Clapping. At first, it sounded like just a few people, but others picked up the beat until the clearing resounded with a tribal pounding.

He appeared.

The Man in the Park, just like Johnny described, his robe glowing in the werelight. He clapped his hands in time with the others, and sang:

*I don't need a whole lot of money,
I don't need a big fine car.
I got everything that a man could want,
I got more than I could ask for.*

Whoops and hollers filled the clearing. Others sang along, but the Man's voice rose above all others. Not a voice that would win any singing contests, but it did possess a solid baritone timber. He sang slowly, sticking to the rhythm.

*I don't have to run around,
I don't have to stay out all night.
Cause I got me a sweet, a sweet, loving woman,
and she knows just how to treat me right.*

Tommy moved towards him. Like walking on the moon, light as a helium balloon. Somehow he had shed his sleeping bag. Maybe he was still dreaming.

*Well, my baby, she's all right,
well, my baby, she's clean out of sight.
Don't you know that she's... she's
some kind of wonderful.
She's some kind of wonderful...
yes, she is, she's, she's
some kind of wonderful.
yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah...*

Tommy floated closer. Despite the crowd, he moved forward without resistance, without pushing or pressing. Soon, he was only a few feet away.

*When I hold her in my arms,
you know she sets my soul on fire.
Oooh, when my baby kisses me,
my heart becomes filled with desire.*

The Man was about Tommy's height, maybe a little taller. Hair and beard neatly trimmed, as Johnny and Greta had said. A smudge of darkness hovered over the left breast of this satin robe, a swirling monogram that Tommy couldn't make out. The Man's pants were loose and white with dark piping. Pajama pants, expensive ones. He was barefoot.

*When she wraps her loving arms around me,
it about drives me out of my mind.
Yeah, when my baby kisses me,
chills run up and down my spine.*

Light was brighter around him. Tommy looked down and noticed something very odd, the shadow of his own arm across his chest, the kind of sharp-edged shadow a bright moon might cast. Tommy moved his arm; the shadow shifted in tandem. But there was no moon and the werelight was too diffuse to cast so sharp a shadow.

The light was coming from the Man.

*She's some kind of wonderful...
yes, she is, she's, she's*

some kind of wonderful.

The Man thrust his arms into the air.

Can I get a witness?

Can I get a witness?

Come on! Can I get a witness?

Come on, Mis-tah Tommy Delacroix.

Did Tommy actually hear that? Was this a dream?

Can I get a witness? Come on!

Can I get a witness? Ooh yeah!

The Man reached into the throng and plucked out a woman, shifting into an informal boogie with her, at first doing all the moves as if she were just a stiff mannequin.

He twirled her out by one hand. She came spinning in Tommy's direction, and snapped to standstill, just inches away. She smiled—Sabrina!—then engaged the dance as a full partner, twirling back toward the Man like Ginger Rogers to Fred Astaire.

I'm talking, talking about my baby. Yeah.

She's some kind of wonderful.

Talking about my baby.

She's some kind of wonderful.

This is not possible, Tommy thought. He moved closer. The Man spun Sabrina out again, then pulled her close into a low dip. Sabrina brimmed with ecstasy; eyes shut, her face and cheeks wide in a smile. She could have been a bride, dancing at her wedding.

Talking about my baby.

She's some kind of wonderful.

I'm talking about my baby, my—

A blinding light. Everything dissolved into white nothingness.

“PLEASE STAY WHERE YOU ARE. YOU ARE IN VIOLATION OF CITY AND PARKS AND RECREATION CODES AGAINST PUBLIC CAMPING.”

The voice repeated its message, an amplified screech above the shouts and protests. People shot off in all directions.

“PLEASE STAY IN PLACE AND AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS FROM AN OFFICER. DO NOT LEAVE THE AREA.”

Tommy turned away, blinked at the white blobs seared across his retinas. A sudden blow rocked his cheek, followed by a burning sting. Some asshole next to him was freaking out, thrashing away as if fending off bats.

Before another blow could land, Tommy grabbed first one flailing wrist, then the other. He shook the man hard. “Take it easy! Take it easy!”

The other man stood up, blinking. Tommy was shocked. It was the Man. Gone were the beatific glow and saintly expression, replaced by a rapid succession of snarling teeth and panicked eyes. He looked as frightened as any animal in a trap.

The cuffs of the once-luminous robe—mere white satin and still firmly clenched in Tommy’s grip—were soiled with grime and grass stains.

Then Tommy recognized him. . .

The world turned soft around the edges, a dreamscape where nothing was real. The ground tilted beneath Tommy’s feet.

Tommy did know him.

He even knew The Man’s name, just as Johnny and Greta had asserted. But he was so out of context, Tommy was amazed he could recognize him at all. He had to ask, just to be sure.

“Charles Claibourne, I presume?”

Chapter 28

That's what Tommy wished he'd said. *Charles Claibourne, I presume?* Something clever. Because anything would've been better than what he actually said.

"Hey, aren't you that Claibourne guy?"

The Man didn't answer. Tommy couldn't tell if he'd even registered the question. He looked so out of it. The cops sifted through the crowd, organizing people into manageable queues for ID-'ing, warrant checks, and the inevitable ticket.

Like a ticket would deter these folks from sleeping in the park. Where were they supposed to go? Did the tickets somehow magically manifest enough shelter space for everyone?

Three cops, clutching their batons with both hands, wedged Tommy's cluster apart, barking directions. When they saw Claibourne, one cop nudged the others. "Hey lookee here, fellas, it's the Miracle Man himself."

"Ask him to cure your limp dick, Henry!"

Claibourne didn't respond. One cop clasped his shoulder. "Okay, Saint Francis, let's get a move on—"

Claibourne snapped to life, slapped the cop's hand away.

"Don't touch me! You will NOT touch me! Do you know who I am? Do you know who the FUCK I am?"

That was enough. All three cops closed in. Tommy didn't see what happened next, but Claibourne's protests transformed into a screech, and then he was down. And quiet. Two cops hauled Claibourne to his feet and led him away, hands cuffed and face red with pepper spray.

Tommy felt a stiff jab against his shoulder blade. He turned to see a couple of San Francisco's finest.

"You wanna end up like your friend there?"

Tommy lifted his hands in surrender. "No trouble here, officers, no trouble at all. But I would like to state for the record that I am a member of the press. Working

on a story on the homeless. I'd be happy to show you my credentials."

The younger cop looked to the other. "All right, nice and slow."

Tommy pulled out his wallet and handed over his driver's license and press card.

The cop squinted at the card. "This was issued way back in '93."

Tommy shrugged. "It's not like they expire."

"Uh-huh. And you're currently on the staff of *The Wimpy Watch Dog*?"

Tommy ignored the bait. "Was. I'm working on assignment at the moment."

The cop handed back his documents. "Keep these handy. I want you to move to the perimeter and stay put for further questioning."

"No problem." Tommy relaxed. Bullet dodged. Then he spotted Johnny about five yards away. Being questioned, hard. "You know, I have an assistant with me. If you wouldn't mind."

The two cops exchanged glances. "Where?"

Tommy pointed at Johnny and called his name. His cops talked to Johnny's cops and brought him over. Tommy and Johnny exchanged glances; Tommy held a finger to his lips.

"This guy is your assistant?" The cops seemed doubtful.

"More like a consultant, really." Tommy took Johnny's arm and started to lead him away, but the cops blocked their path. Tommy looked back to the boss cop and asked the magic question. "Are we being detained or are we free to go?"

The cop made a big show of thinking about it, but they all knew how it would play out. If detained, Tommy and Johnny would clam up and demand lawyers. The cop probably knew that Tommy's story was bogus, but that *The Dog* would have his back anyway, if only to spite the Powers That Be.

"Go home, Mr. Delacroix, and take your friend with you. If I see you in the park again tonight, I will have you arrested, press card or not. The department thanks you for your cooperation."

Tommy jogged the few yards back to the wall and swept up his sleeping bags, scrunching them into a big mushy ball with both arms. He felt like a paratrooper who'd just landed and was desperate for cover. Johnny bee-lined for the Music Concourse, which was, of course, crowded with more cops.

"Johnny! No! Wait!" Tommy wanted to head in the exact opposite direction. Through the woods, and across the ball fields, safely out of the park and back to

the Jetta.

Tommy caught up. “Johnny, let’s not do anything crazy.”

Johnny’s trajectory and stride were determined. His blue eyes had locked onto a target. Tommy followed his line of sight, and sure enough, there was Claibourne, scowling from the back of a squad car. A cop sat sideways in the driver’s seat, door open and legs out. He held a clipboard and was questioning Claibourne through the cage mesh.

The cop stood up and walked across the road to talk with some other cops. Like a robot on a mission, Johnny strode toward Claibourne.

Tommy jogged to keep up. “Johnny, you can’t. The cops—”

The screech of tires froze them. They’d stepped directly into the path of an oncoming squad car, which skidded a good four feet before not hitting them. The driver’s door swung open and a tall figure emerged.

“Johnny, is that you? What the hell happened?” Sergeant Guardino, the same cop who’d helped Johnny on Friday. He looked at Tommy and nodded as if they bumped into each other in the park in the middle of the night all the time.

Tommy, for his part, had never been so happy to see a cop in all his life.

Guardino scanned the scene, his jaw set tight and his mouth pressed into a frown. He spotted Claibourne, still scowling in his backseat cage.

“Shit, I’m too late.” Guardino looked at Tommy and Johnny, and jerked his head back to his car. “You two, come on. You’re riding with me.”

Tommy didn’t understand. “Why? Where are you taking us?”

“Just get in the goddamned car, Delacroix.”

Johnny ran toward the passenger door. “Shotgun!”

Chapter 29

From the park, they drove north through the tree-lined avenues of the Inner Richmond. Guardino was shaking his head and cursing under his breath. Johnny was watching the three-story houses roll by. Each time they passed through a patch of street light, Johnny emitted a *voomp*, as if they'd passed through a wormhole in the space-time continuum.

Tommy sat in the blue twilight of the backseat, alone and wondering where they were going. It was hard to relax in the back of a squad car, no matter what the circumstances. Worse still, each *voomp* carried him further away from the leather-upholstered refuge of his Jetta, which was parked on the exact opposite side of the park.

“Voomp... Voomp...”

A few blocks from the park, Johnny patted the cop's shoulder and pointed out the window at a shaggy dog cantering down the sidewalk. Guardino eased to a stop alongside the animal, who froze and stared back at them.

“Coyote,” Johnny said.

The animal held their gaze without flinching. The mist of breath curled around his muzzle. Is there a problem? He straddled the sidewalk, the 8TH AVE/ANZA STREET sign crisscrossed in the background.

“This is totally cool,” Johnny said.

Tommy had never seen a coyote so close before. He looked at the animal and their eyes locked. Suddenly, it was no longer a coyote but Coyote. Tommy was no longer a man, but Man, and they stared at each other not from car to sidewalk, but across a thousand meadows, a thousand desert arroyos, a thousand forest clearings.

Here we are again.

Yes, here we are.

The coyote broke off and resumed his slow trot towards the park.

Johnny broke the silence. “Man, it just keeps getting better and better.”

Tommy shook his head, not sure what had just happened. Acid flashback? Psychotic episode? He felt dizzy, queasy. Brain tumor? He told himself that he was just tired, sleep-deprived. He counted to ten and tried Carlotta's yoga breathing, inhaling for four beats, exhaling for eight. It helped.

On Geary, Guardino pulled into a Fifties-style diner, an oasis of curved chromium edges and candy-colored neon in the foggy night. He radioed in that he was going on break, and opened the back door for Tommy, who was happy to be out of the car.

"Let's get some coffee. I need to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

It wasn't a request, but that was okay.

Tommy had a few questions of his own.

They hadn't been sitting for more than thirty seconds before the waitress set a cup of hot cocoa in front of Guardino. The sweet smell brought Tommy back to coming home from school on cold winter days.

"How you doing tonight, Davy?"

"Slow night so far, Betty. How's Marty?"

"Arthritis not doing too well with the summer fog, but otherwise the same." She slid a couple of plastic-covered menus onto the table.

Tommy raised his hand. "Just coffee for me, please."

Johnny said. "That hot cocoa looks good."

Tommy shrugged. It did look good. "Make mine a hot cocoa, too."

"You guys want marshmallow on top? We got Marshmallow Fluff."

"Um, sure."

Johnny nodded and rocked in his seat like a big kid. "Marshmallow Fluff? Hell, yes!"

The waitress gathered up the menus and left.

Guardino pulled out a long notepad and flipped to a fresh page. He smiled. "I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to get down your statements."

"Our statements?" Tommy chuckled. "You mean about how your fellow officers beat down and pepper-sprayed one of the most powerful men in the city?"

Guardino made a face. "I know, I know."

"Didn't they recognize him?"

"Did you?"

Tommy wanted to say yes, but then remembered that he almost hadn't.

Guardino nodded. "We can get to that later. Now, what did you see before my fellow officers showed up?" He gave Tommy a hard look. "Let's get something out of the way first, Tommy. It's okay to call you Tommy?"

"Tommy's fine."

The cop's face softened. "Look, I'm not the enemy here. I'm not here to bust you or tamper with witnesses or anything like that."

Johnny nudged Tommy in the ribs. "He's a good guy, Tommy. He's on our side."

Tommy wondered what that side was. But the cop had been kind to Johnny on Friday. Tommy let the tension in his shoulder go, eased back against the cool Naugahyde. "Okay, okay. I'll answer your questions, and since we're being friendly, you won't mind answering a few of mine."

Guardino nodded. "Sure, why not? So talk to me, tell me what happened in the park tonight."

They told him everything. About Sabrina, the singing, and how Claibourne had changed when the cops came. If Tommy tried to elaborate on any part, Guardino would ask him to stick to the facts. Tommy had forgotten that Claibourne had called his name, but Johnny volunteered both items. Tommy told them about the messages that Greta had scrawled in the chapbooks.

"That's pretty cryptic. But she knew that you knew Johnny, that you'd seen him?"

"Sure, that's why I was there."

"And you say she'd been healed also?"

"I didn't use those words, but yeah, her leg certainly looked a lot better. She even jumped up onto the stage when her turn came."

Guardino flipped to a fresh page and scrawled a lengthy note. "And the first thing that Johnny asked you to do was to go to the park?"

"Yes." Then Tommy remembered. He rapped a knuckle against the Formica tabletop. "No, wait. He asked if I was ready."

"Ready for what?"

“He wasn’t specific, but then he talked about going to the park.”

“Is that right, Johnny?”

Johnny shrugged. “I don’t remember.”

None of the weird things they told Guardino seemed to faze him, to distract him from his severe purpose. Guardino filled out four pages of the notebook. He didn’t ask any questions beyond *What happened next?* or *So then what?* If anything struck him as out of the ordinary, he didn’t let on.

Johnny talked about Sabrina. “And suddenly she was just dancing. She threw down her crutches and danced like nobody’s business. She was so beautiful.”

Guardino looked up from his notes. “Are you saying she was healed?”

“Yes! On the spot! Just like me.”

Tommy guffawed. “Oh, come on, Johnny.”

“What?”

“You can’t say that. We don’t know her actual medical condition or whatever. For all you know, it was a momentary thing. Maybe she’s really hurting now because of it.” Tommy sipped his cocoa. “We don’t know if she’s really even sick.”

“How can you say that?” Johnny’s voice dropped. “Tommy, you saw what you saw. Don’t deny it. Don’t refuse to see.”

Guardino rested his hands on the table. “All right, gentlemen. Let’s settle down.”

“What about me, Tommy? You know I was blind. You can’t deny what he did for me.”

Tommy slurped up more cocoa. A thin crust of marshmallow foam had hardened around the rim of the mug. “I’m looking into that.”

Johnny’s face dropped. “What?”

Tommy didn’t see any point in mentioning Nurse Steve to Guardino. “Nothing. Forget about it.”

“How do you mean, you’re looking into it?”

Tommy said nothing. Johnny slid out of the booth and skulked off towards the restrooms.

Guardino flipped through his notebook. “I don’t want to know anything about that.”

The cop summarized everything Tommy and Johnny had told him. “That’s it? Nothing else?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Guardino added some more notes. “Tell me something, Tommy. Why are you here? What’s your interest?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was invited.” Tommy had meant that as a joke, but it was true. Greta and Johnny had sent him to the park, where Claibourne had been expecting him. How had Johnny known to find him at the Paradise? Certainly not from Greta. Not enough time. Tommy wondered if she knew who The Man in the Park was in real life.

“Yeah, I guess you were. But I can’t imagine why.” Guardino flipped through his notepad, each page covered with his hieroglyphic scrawl.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” Guardino said, finally looking up, “that your friend here gets his eyesight recovered, you see a crippled woman dance the Lindy, and you’re still all well-we-need-to-see. Mr. Logical and Rational.”

“Don’t tell me you believe in this miracle stuff. Even your cop buddies were joking about it in the park.” Tommy leaned in. “Why are you here, Sergeant? What’s your interest?”

Guardino smiled. “I’m here to protect and to serve.”

“Who? Claibourne?”

He said nothing, which told Tommy everything.

“You’re protecting him? What the . . . How long has this been going on?”

Guardino shrugged and slurped his cocoa. “I don’t know. Eight years or so.”

“Eight years? Eight years!” How had Tommy not heard about this? No one had ever mentioned it in all those Labor Days when he’d been ladling out Food Not Bombs soup.

“Yes and no. Back then, it was only an occasional sometime thing. Maybe once every couple of months. Lately, though, seems like he’s going out all the time.”

“And you follow him?”

“I keep an eye on him. Try to, anyway. Just to make sure nothing bad happens.”

Incredible as it was, it did explain how the whole business had been kept under wraps. With Guardino’s helps, Claibourne had been able to avoid arrest. And

scandal.

“So you believe all this, then? That Charles Claibourne, blue-ribbon bagman and power broker extraordinaire and prince of the overclass, comes to the park at night and lays his hands upon the homeless to ease their affliction.” Tommy laughed. “I mean, come on! Do you know half the evil shit this guy has pulled in this town? For money? For power? Half those people in the park are homeless because of Charles Claibourne. Remember the Temple Hotel deal a few years back?”

Guardino held up his hands. “Sorry, I don’t really read the papers. You got a better explanation?”

“Um yeah! How about the guy is, I don’t know. . . completely schizoid? A total nut job? I mean, here’s this rich guy who undergoes a complete identity shift and wanders into the park at midnight in his pajamas and bare feet and mixes it up with the homeless.” Guardino tried to interrupt but Tommy was on a roll. “You should’ve seen him when he snapped out of it. The guy had no clue where he was or what was going on. Tell me the guy isn’t a total schizo.”

Guardino nodded. “I know, I know. I don’t get that part, either. And believe me, I’ve been there when he comes out of it. Once, in my car”

“Your car?”

“What, I’m supposed to let the guy walk home in his bare feet? But never mind all that. How do you account for all the miracles?”

“What miracles?”

Guardino thrust his notepad at Tommy, flipping the pages. “See these? Infections, blindness, paraplegics, skin diseases, alcoholism, even AIDS and cancer. Just look. And I got a dozen more notebooks at home.”

Tommy tried to read one page, but the hieroglyphic scrawls were incomprehensible to him. “If he’s been doing this for eight years, how come it’s not already news?”

Guardino shook his head. “Say you heard about some homeless guy who had AIDS but this year tests clean, what’s your first reaction? That it’s a miracle? No, you figure he was misdiagnosed, right? The first test was a false positive, right? If a homeless guy in a wheelchair stops showing up at an under-funded, under-staffed public clinic, you think anyone’s running out to look for him?”

Tommy didn’t know what to say. The numbers were meaningless. The accounts mere hearsay, anecdotal evidence at best. “How many of these miracles have you

personally witnessed?"

Guardino sighed so hard and fast, spit almost flew. "Don't go there, Delacroix. Don't be a dick. No, I haven't witnessed any, not a single one. I'm always too late. Always. But damn it, I talk to these people and. . . Look at Johnny. How can you look at Johnny and. . . "

Guardino went quiet, a pile of slumped black cloth and leather. Then he looked Tommy in the eye. "Let me tell you about my real interest here."

Guardino had a cousin named Mario from San Rafael, a few miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. They'd grown up together, Mario being just five years younger. A promising Civil Engineering student at UC Berkeley, Mario had somehow gone down the wrong road, hooked up with the wrong people—, however you want to put it—, and wound up as a junkie living on the streets. Guardino skimped on the background but pulled no punches about Mario's situation. After a couple of years, Mario was HIV positive, too.

"So one Thanksgiving night at my father's house in the Sunset, maybe nine years ago, everyone's left or gone to bed and I'm watching television when I hear something outside. So I retrieve my firearm and go out back." Guardino held his hand up like a make-believe pistol, two fingers for the barrel. "So I come up around the side alley, and there's Mario with two low-life scumbags, trying to bust the lock on my father's garage. Motherfucker was trying to rip off his own uncle. Can you believe it? So I call Mario by name, which makes his two buddies run off, and I grab him by the collar, and I take my gun. . . ."

Guardino struggled with the words.

"I press my gun right up under his jaw and tell him that I'll blow his fucking head off if he ever comes around my dad's house, my house, anybody's house, ever again. And I meant it, too." Guardino relaxed and let his arms rest on the table. "I threatened to kill my own little cousin, Mario. The gun was loaded, safety off. One pull."

Tommy nodded, trying to appear sympathetic. Guardino's confession sounded like an audition for *NYPD Blue*. Unreal and over the top.

"Uh, wow, that's, hmm, yeah. So what happened?"

"So about six weeks go by, it's New Year's Day, and who shows up at my front door? Mario, only I almost don't recognize him. He looks great. He's put on weight, his skin and hair look shiny, very healthy. And the tracks are gone from his arm, and I mean gone. He tells me about this Man in the Park who saved him, who sang to him and healed him, just like that. I wouldn't have believed it,

but the tracks were gone, like he'd never stuck a single needle in his arm. He went back to Berkeley and finished his degree, and now he's building sewage systems in Africa someplace."

Tommy didn't know what to think. It was an impressive story, something you'd hear on a talk show. His sleep-deprived brain manufactured little montages like on Oprah.

Behind him, Johnny's voice broke the moment. "And no more HIV either, I'll bet."

Guardino drained the last of his cocoa. "Not a trace. He's tested negative ever since."

"Uh-huh," Johnny said. "Well, maybe you better send the before and after test results to Mr. Skeptic here, or he won't believe you."

Chapter 30

Guardino ferried them back to Tommy's Jetta. As they cut through the park, Tommy looked for the coyote, but there was no sign of it. Tommy wondered if the episode had been real or if, along with the entire night, it was just part of one big, weird dream.

Tommy and Johnny drove back to the Mission, climbing up Ashbury Heights and dropping down through the Castro. Johnny was quiet; Tommy assumed he was still upset.

"Johnny?"

"Hmm?"

"How did you know that I was at the Paradise tonight?"

"Where?"

"The place you found me. On Eleventh Street?"

"I didn't know you were there."

"You just happened to be hanging around SoMa? It was just a coincidence?"

Johnny shifted in his seat. "Yes. No. Maybe. I was sent down there but I didn't know why until I saw you. Then it was all clear."

"What do you mean, you were sent? Who sent you?"

"Maybe sent is the wrong word. More like I was drawn there, like a canoe on a river, you know? I just jumped into the current and that's where it took me."

Tommy didn't know what to say.

Johnny went on. "I was hanging around the Haight, near the park, and suddenly just felt like heading in that general direction. I never had a destination in mind. You know, just going with the flow."

"Like the canoe." Sent or carried, Tommy still didn't get it.

"I could ask you the same question. I mean, what were you doing at the Paradise yourself?"

"Me? I went to find Greta."

“The poet lady.”

“Right.” Tommy smiled. “The Rainbow Woman, remember?”

“Why her?”

“I wanted to talk to someone else who might’ve been in the park the night you recovered your eyesight. She spends a lot of time on the street, and I know her, so I figured. . .”

Johnny nodded. “Huh. Sounds like a real long shot to me.”

“Yeah, well, I had a pretty strong hunch.”

“A hunch,” Johnny repeated.

“Yeah, you know, we journalists get them sometimes, and this one paid off.”

“So you got this hunch and felt compelled to check it out.”

“What’s your point, Johnny?”

“Well, I’m just thinking that it’s funny how you didn’t get what I meant when you wound up there in the exact same way.”

“It’s not the same at all.”

“Sure it is. If I had said I went down to SoMa on a hunch, you wouldn’t think it was mysterious at all. You’d say, ‘oh, okay, Johnny, now I understand completely one hundred percent what you’re talking about.’”

“Umm.”

“You’re so funny, Tommy. You think you were just sitting there in your living room, minding your own business, logically analyzing everything, looking for witnesses, who- what- when- where- how, and you think somehow you just got this idea out of nowhere to look for Greta at the Paradise. Like it’s all rational and intellectual.”

Tommy slowed for a red light. “I never told you I was in my living room when I decided to go to the Paradise. How did you know that?”

“You don’t get it, Tommy, so I can’t tell you.” Johnny leaned back. “You know, I wasn’t always blind, so I knew what the color blue looked like, I knew what the American flag looked like. I knew because I could still see them in my head. But sometimes I’d meet someone who’d been born blind, blind their whole lives. Blue meant nothing to them.”

Tommy didn’t appreciate the little lecture. “What, so I’m like those people? Blind from birth in your crazy little analogy?”

Johnny was quiet for a few moments. When he spoke, he spoke very softly. "Not exactly like that. You know blue, we all know blue, but I can't make you understand something you can't remember. I want you to see, but I can't talk you into seeing, you know?"

"Sure, Johnny. Whatever." Tommy was tired of talking. His mouth and jaw felt out of synch, and the conversation was running off the rails.

Night was giving way to morning. The blue streets were clotted with double-parked delivery trucks and newspaper vans.

At the apartment, Tommy made up the futon sofa in the home office for Johnny. While his guest washed up, Tommy retrieved his cell phone from his leather jacket. The screen showed three messages.

The first was from Carlotta. *Just checking in.* Excited female voices and muffled piano jazz made her hard to understand. Sounded like the Valley Grrrls! were having a good old time down in Half Moon Bay.

The second message was from, ta-da, Nurse Steve. He said that the records at the Veterans Administration for the party in question showed several consistent diagnoses for total blindness "resulting from severe trauma to the retina and optic nerve." In other words, the party was not just blind but "completely and irreparably" so.

As Tommy replayed Steve's message for the third time, Johnny came into the kitchen and filled a glass of water from the tap. His blue eyes twinkled in defiance of the facts being reported over the phone. Getting verification was part of the job, but Tommy still felt like a shit for doubting Johnny.

The third message was Carlotta again, at 1:30 AM per the robotic voice, this time a little more concern in her voice. The Valley Grrrls! chatter and jazz were gone; she was probably back in her hotel room. Just wondering where you are.

If she only knew. Tommy wondered how he'd explain everything to her. He considered telling Johnny about the news from Nurse Steve, but why stir things up?

Johnny went straight to bed. He didn't say good night.

Tommy saw no point in sleeping. It was almost five and he usually got up around quarter to six. He poured a glass of orange juice and sat on the sofa. Leaning back, he closed his eyes and thought about everything.

Completely and irreparably blind.

Chapter 31

Marta knits in her courtyard. Lupe hangs wash on the line. Gustavo and Jorge—Lupe’s boys—run around a small plastic kiddie pool, squirting each other with water pistols. Lazlo sits in the pool, splashing and making motorboat sounds with his lips. He laughs as his cousins dodge and parry around the arcing streams of silver water. The sun hurts Marta’s eyes. The more she tries to close her eyes against the brightness, the sharper it feels.

Turning her head, she sees three blackbirds in the bare branches of the persimmon tree. They chirp at each other, an odd sound for blackbirds. Marta realizes they have come for Lazlo, after all, and are arguing about the best way to take him.

Lupe doesn’t notice, but when does she ever notice anything? Lupe is always happy, always making jokes, always leaving Marta to make sure everyone is taken care of. “You’re the oldest,” she always tells Marta. “It’s your job.”

Marta will have to save Lazlo from the blackbirds.

But how? She cannot even lift herself from her seat. She is thick and leaden, like a blanket soaked with rain. Marta wonders where Isabel is, then remembers the hospital.

The blackbirds grow more shrill. . .

And there was Mama, her iron gray hair bound into a single thick braid, shaking Marta awake. “Marta, Marta.” She held out the office cell phone, urging it into Marta’s hands. All the lights pulse and blink, the ringer shrill in the small hospital room.

“Sorry, sorry,” Marta said, looking around to get her bearings. She’d fallen asleep in one of the visitors chairs in Isabel’s room, the new morning sun bright in her eyes.

“Hello?” She stepped into the hallway.

“Marta, it’s Drake. Drake Noyes.” His voice had the same playful tone as always, but gravelly with age and scotch. “I hope I’m not calling too early.”

Marta glanced at her watch. 6:45. “No sir, of course not.”

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, Marta?”

“Yes, too long, sir.”

He sighed. “I’m sorry it’s not under better circumstances.”

Marta was confused. Was he talking about Isabel?

“I’m sorry, Marta. I’m getting ahead of myself.” Drake cleared his throat. “We have a bit of a situation. Charles had a severe episode last night.”

“Oh, no! Where is he? Is he all right?”

“He’s fine, just the usual wandering around the neighborhood. But the police are involved this time, in a bad way, so it’s going to be a messy couple of days. Charles got caught up in some sort of sweep. I don’t have all the details, except that he put up a fuss and wound up getting arrested.”

Marta shook her head. If only she’d gotten his medicine to him, this might not have happened. “They arrested him? Don’t they usually just drive him home?”

The line was silent for a moment. “Yes, but this time’s different.”

“This is terrible. What do I need to do, Mr. Noyes?” Marta pulled her steno pad from her purse with her free hand and uncapped a pen with her teeth.

“First, cancel any meetings or appointments he has scheduled for today.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” She scratched a quick note. “And tomorrow?”

“Let’s see how things go today. I’m on my way to 850 Bryant now. We should be able to take care of this right away.”

Marta understood. Too many people owed Mr. Claibourne too many favors for this to become anything serious. But the media were another story.

“Maybe you should work from home today. In case the press shows up at the office.”

“Good idea, sir. Will you be preparing a statement?”

“Well, let’s hope that that won’t be necessary. I hope we can just spirit him out of 850 Bryant and be done with it.” Drake chuckled. “Just like old times, eh, Marta?”

Marta smiled. Drake Noyes was a good man. “Yes, sir. Just like old times.”

They were both silent.

“You know, Marta, I thought all this sleepwalking business was in the past. Did you notice any sign, any indication. . . ?”

Marta took a deep breath and told Drake about the prescription and how Mr. Claibourne had forgotten it, and why she needed to be with her sister. "I should have made some kind of arrangements, Mr. Noyes. I'm sorry."

"Nonsense!" Her old boss's voice was deep and soothing. "This isn't your fault. Get that out of your head, right now."

"Yes, sir," Marta said, but the guilt remained.

"I'm sorry, Marta. I didn't get a chance to ask how things are with you. How have you been? Marge was just asking about you the other day."

Marta smiled. Drake was so kind. "That's very sweet of Mrs. Noyes. Please send her my warmest regards. Tell her everything is fine."

"I will, Marta, I will. Don't worry about your sister and your nephew. You're in excellent hands there with Dr. Spungen and his team. They're the best."

"Yes, sir."

Marta ended the call and went back in. Her mother was hunched over Isabel's feet, a rosary wrapped around her clenched hands like barbed wire. Isabel looked like a flattened grape, her skin pale and translucent, her eyes ringed in purple. Marta watched her chest until she could see it rising and falling with each breath.

Content that her sister was alive and healing, Marta whispered to Mama that she was going to the cafeteria for coffee and to make some calls for Mr. Claibourne.

Chapter 32

Tommy awoke to the sound of screaming.

Carlotta!

It took him a moment to pull together where and who he was. As he extracted himself from the sofa, he slipped, smashing onto the floor, ass bone first. He got to his feet just as a naked Carlotta flew into the room.

“Tommy! Tommy!” She tore the chenille throw from the sofa and covered herself. “There’s a man in the shower! Call 9-1-1!”

Tommy heard the running water. Johnny.

“Honey, sweetie, no.”

Carlotta’s eye darted to the corridor and narrowed. She pulled the chenille tighter around her. “Tommy, who the hell is in the bathroom?”

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” He moved to embrace her. She pulled back at first, but then gave in a little to the hug. Tommy felt her curves beneath the satiny material and became aroused. The fabric was cool to the touch, but a vivid heat radiated through from Carlotta’s skin.

“What the hell is going on? Tommy?”

“It’s just Johnny,” he cooed. “The blind guy I told you about.”

She pulled away. “You mean the homeless guy?”

“Yes.”

Before Tommy could say more, Johnny peeked around the door jamb from the corridor. Tommy waved him in, and he entered shyly, like a little kid meeting one of Mommy’s friends. He wore Tommy’s robe, three sizes too small, holding the front closed with both hands. An aura of moisture and soap carried into the room with him.

“Carlotta, this is Johnny, the friend I told you about earlier. Johnny, Carlotta.”

Carlotta fingered her hair out of her face. “Good morning.”

“Ma’am.” Johnny dipped his head and bowed slightly. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Carlotta softened. "It's okay. I didn't mean to startle you, either."

Johnny looked to Tommy. "Hey, man, I'm really sorry but I accidentally knocked over that pink bottle of shampoo, and it all ran out before I noticed. I'm sorry."

Tommy felt Carlotta tense up. "That's okay, Johnny. Maybe you should go get dressed."

"Sure, man, sure." He bowed again in Carlotta's direction and ducked back to the corridor.

Carlotta hammered a fist against Tommy's chest. "That was my custom blend French shampoo!" Her eyes narrowed. "You're replacing it! Today!"

Tommy backed away. "Sure, sweetie, of course."

"What is he even doing here?"

"It's a long story." The previous night and all its unreality flashed before his eyes. So much to explain. "What are you doing home so early, anyway? Didn't you take the morning off just so you could have breakfast with all the girls in Half Moon Bay or something like that?"

She hit him again. "Are you saying this is my fault?"

"No, no. Just that. . . "

"I come home early, I look in our bedroom, don't see you but hear the shower running."

"Honey, sweetie. . . "

"What the hell am I supposed to think except that my boyfriend, my fiancé, is in the shower? Who I thought I might pleasantly surprise."

Tommy smiled. "I guess it was a surprise all right, hah."

"Don't you dare make jokes now, Tommy! I mean it!" She hammered his chest again.

"Come on, sweetie, you have to admit, it is kind of funny. I mean, this is a story we'll be telling for the rest of our lives. We'll be telling it to our grandchildren."

She still glowered, the reference to grandchildren having had no soothing effect whatsoever.

Tommy cleared his throat. "Why don't you get dressed while I make the coffee? Then we can talk." He leaned in for a kiss, but she turned and stormed away, trailing chenille.

Tommy dumped out the old coffee grounds and filter, and filled the machine with fresh water. The stove clock glowed 8:20, way later than he expected. He should be on his way to work already, but with Carlotta in her present state, there was no way he'd be out of there before nine. He still had to shower and dress.

As Tommy measured out the coffee, he called Tatanisha's direct line, to let her know he'd be late. He could already hear her deep, berating voice. Oh sure, Tommy. Too much fun this weekend, hmm? But she didn't pick up. Odd, since she was always in by eight. The call forwarded to the main employee directory.

"Thank you for calling TransData MetaSystems. If you know the extension. . . "

He tried again, and again it looped back. Maybe the phones were down. It happened. Tommy could do nothing but hurry up, and try to slip in unnoticed.

With the coffee machine hissing and huffing, Tommy took a deep breath and headed for the bedroom, where Carlotta was waiting for a very good explanation.

When he came in, she was sitting at her antique vanity, brushing out her hair. The vanity had been one of her garage sale finds. A little cleaning and refinishing had revealed the burled beauty of the wood. The mirror was smoky and discolored around the edges, but Carlotta liked that, claiming that such flaws gave the piece character.

Carlotta's pinched expression glared back at Tommy from the mirror.

"Coffee's on," he offered, closing the door behind him.

"I've never been so scared in my life," she hissed. "You could have called to warn me!"

"Honey, sweetie, I'm sorry. We got in late last night. Like four in the morning. I didn't want to wake you. And besides, I thought you were coming back later. You told me you were taking the morning off. I mean, what happened to the good-bye breakfast in Half Moon Bay?"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, yeah, well, when somebody didn't call me or return my messages, hello! I decided to skip the breakfast and come straight back."

"I'm sorry, Cee. I forgot my cell phone last night."

"What were you doing out so late anyway? On a Sunday night?" She pivoted to face him. "Don't you have to go to work this morning?"

"Yeah, I do. It's crazy. We were hanging out in the park and. . . Why are you looking at me like I'm a serial killer?"

“What is it, Tommy? What is it really?”

“Honey, there’s nothing. . . I mean, what. . . ?”

“Oh sure, that’s right. You always bring homeless people back to the apartment.”

“Well, it’s just Johnny.”

She set the brush down with a smack. “What were you doing in the park?”

“Well, we went looking for the guy who healed Johnny, and I fell asleep.”

Carlotta’s face dropped. “You slept in the park?” She stood and paced in small circles.

“Yes, I mean, no.” Tommy took a deep breath. “Not exactly.”

“Dolores Park?”

“No, of course not. Golden Gate Park.”

“Oh, I am so relieved, Tommy, because that makes all the difference!” She shook her head, her jaw jutted out in disgust.

Tommy rubbed his nose. “That reminds me. I forgot the sleeping bags in the car.”

“What? If you didn’t sleep in the park, why did you need the sleeping bags?”

“Well—”

“Did you sleep in the park or not?”

“No, we came back here.” Tommy thought better about it. “Well, technically speaking, I did fall asleep in the park—”

“In a sleeping bag?”

“Yes, but—”

“Wait a second.” Carlotta’s face flattened with realization. “You let a homeless man sleep in one of my good REI bags?” She sat on the vanity bench and massaged her temples. No doubt her imagination was running wild with all the parasites, rank secretions, and feral grime that the homeless Johnny must have slathered onto the sleeping bag like rancid mayonnaise.

“It’s just Johnny. It’s not like he’s a leper.” This was annoying. A few months earlier, Carlotta had lent their friends Dave and Diane the sleeping bags for a week-long backpacking trip, and she hadn’t even bothered to air them out. Didn’t Johnny rate the same consideration, or was he somehow sub-Dave and sub-Diane in her mind?

“Okay, okay. So you fell asleep in a sleeping bag in the park but you didn’t sleep in the park? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Honey, sweetie, look. . . I know it’s confusing.”

“Hello!”

“Actually, after the cops showed up—”

“The cops?” Carlotta’s eyes widened.

Tommy shook his head. “No. I mean, yes, but it was no big deal, they were just routhing the homeless from the encampment.”

“Wait! You slept in a homeless encampment?”

“I don’t see how that’s—”

“Were you arrested, Tommy?” Carlotta crossed her arms. “Are you telling me everything?”

“No! I mean, no, I wasn’t arrested.” His ribs remembered the nudge of the cop’s nightstick. “Although it was touch-and-go for a few minutes there.”

Carlotta’s face twisted and tears seeped out of her eyes, and suddenly her whole face was shiny wet.

Tommy cursed himself. Without realizing it, he’d been playing whack-a-mole with all her buttons. Worse still, the clock was ticking closer to nine. A crying jag was the last thing he needed.

“Cee? Come on, what’s the matter?”

“Tommy, I just don’t understand what’s going on with you. Are you having some kind of breakdown?” Carlotta ripped tissues from a box on the vanity. “Sleeping in the park, bringing homeless people into the apartment, and now you tell me the cops got involved?” She looked up. “Is it the wedding? Are things moving too fast for you?”

“What are you talking about?”

She smacked a tissue-clenching fist against her thigh. “Be honest! Are you feeling pressured or something? I know guys can get scared and start acting out.”

“Honey, please! I’m psyched about the wedding. I’m the one who proposed, remember?” Tommy knelt down and moved closer to her. He had to fix this, and fast.

Carlotta dabbed at her tears. “Then what is it? What’s really going on? Last week, everything was fine, perfectly fine, until I told you that Mom and Burt

were coming to talk about the wedding.”

This was news to Tommy. “You didn’t tell me that they were coming specifically to talk about the wedding.”

“Don’t be stupid, Tommy. You know they want a big wedding back East with all the flowers and everything.” She blew her nose. “You think they’d miss a chance to try to change our minds?”

Tommy and Carlotta were dead set on a small ceremony in San Francisco with just immediate family and a few friends. Maybe by the beach, someplace with a view.

“Well,” Tommy said. “If this is about the wedding—”

“It’s not about the wedding! Oh God!”

Tommy edged closer. He wanted to hold her. His hand hovered just behind her shoulder, as if afraid of an electric shock.

“Tommy, everything was going along just fine. We have our life together, we have our jobs, we’re saving up for a house.” She tugged another tissue from the box. “Suddenly, it’s as if I don’t know who you are.”

Tommy put his hand on her shoulder. No shock, just warm cotton. “Honey, no.”

“So I keep thinking, What? What is it? Is he getting scared?” Carlotta pressed the tissue into a small ball in one hand and picked at it with her fingers. “Maybe he doesn’t really want to get married.”

“Honey, come on now. You know that hasn’t changed. You know how much I love you. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” Tommy smiled. “I know that’s a cliché, but it’s true. Come on.” He kissed her cheeks, obliterating the tears, then softly kissed her lips. They were swollen and puffy from the crying.

“It’s just that you’re acting so weird all of a sudden. Really weird. Sleeping with homeless people in the park, bringing them home!” Carlotta studied the ball of tissue in her grip. “I know he’s your friend and all, and you should be able to invite your friends over. . . It’s just. . . I don’t know. You’re scaring me.”

“Come on, Cee.” Tommy took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. “I want to marry you more than anything in the world. I’ll marry you this morning, if you want. City Hall. Or a big wedding back East. It doesn’t matter to me, so long as we wake up the next day married.” Tommy saw his opening. “Husband and wife.”

“Oh, Tommy, no, it’s not about that—”

“I know, I know. But I’m saying—”

Carlotta smiled, lips quivering with the effort. “I’m sorry. It’s just all these things are happening at once. First I couldn’t reach you last night, then Johnny in the shower.”

Tommy pulled her into his arms. “Oh honey, I am soooo sorry about that.”

“You should be!”

“But come on, it’s just Johnny. He’s just a great big teddy bear, you know. I’ll bet he’s more embarrassed than you are.”

They grew quiet, her on her vanity stool, Tommy kneeling on the floor. He could tell that she was past the darkest moment.

“So what do you say? Let’s go to City Hall and get hitched?”

Carlotta pushed him away, smiling now. “No! You need to get to work! Get in the shower and I’ll fix you something you can eat in the car.” Her expression shifted. “What about Johnny?”

“Don’t worry. I can drop him off somewhere on my way to the freeway.”

“Okay.” Carlotta paused. “I should probably offer him some coffee.” Her proper upbringing was asserting itself. In her mother’s house, poor hospitality was the eighth deadly sin.

“That’d be very nice, Cee.”

Carlotta checked her face in the mirror and blew her nose one last time. “You’re sure this guy’s harmless?”

“Completely.”

She opened the door and stepped into the hall. “Just don’t take forever in the shower.” She turned to leave but pivoted back into the room. “There’s one more thing you haven’t told me.”

Tommy was in the midst of pulling off his shirt. “Hmm?”

“What were you doing in the park until four in the morning? Did you find the guy?”

“Yes, but can we talk about it later? Please? I’m totally late.”

Carlotta regarded Tommy and a shadow passed over her face. “Is there anything I should know about you that I don’t already?”

“Like am I a werewolf or something?” Tommy smiled. “Sorry, nothing like that. But I promise you, it’s a good story.”

“It had better be, Delacroix. It had better be.”

Tommy took his shower. As he left the bathroom, Carlotta’s laugh—her real throaty laugh, not her polite social laugh—filled the apartment like music. He peeked out from the corridor, through the living room, and into the kitchen. Carlotta and Johnny were sitting in the breakfast nook, drinking coffee and enjoying themselves like the oldest of friends.

Tommy dressed quickly, pausing only to try Tatanisha’s extension one last time. No luck. He wished he had her cell phone number.

He went into the kitchen. “You two seem to be having fun.”

Carlotta winked. “Johnny’s been giving me the lowdown on your wild and crazy bachelor days in Cole Valley.” Her smile was tight; Tommy wasn’t out of the doghouse just yet.

“Oh, really.”

Johnny shrugged and smiled.

“Well, as much as I’d love to stick around and discuss all that in great detail, I am late. Honey, I really have to go. Come on, Johnny, I can drop you someplace if you want.”

Carlotta clutched Johnny’s arm. “Not so fast! You can go to work if that’s so important to you. Johnny and I are going out to breakfast.”

“Is that so?”

Johnny nodded and even blushed a little.

“Well, honey, that’s fine. Can you at least see me out?” Tommy extended his hand.

Carlotta ignored the gesture, but scooted out of the nook and walked past him into the living room. Tommy aimed a stern finger at Johnny. “Don’t be telling too many old stories, okay?”

He caught up to Carlotta in the hallway. “You don’t have to do that, you know. Take him out to breakfast, I mean.”

“No, I want to. He’s very sweet.” She seemed to be warming up to Johnny. At the front door, she practically shooed Tommy away.

“Hey, what about my breakfast? You said you’d make me something.”

Carlotta's eyes widened. "One sec." She disappeared. When she came back, she foisted a granola jelly bar into Tommy's hands. "This will have to do!" She gave him a quick peck, patted him on the head like a school boy, and closed the door.

Walking down the stairs, Tommy couldn't help but laugh. Old Johnny really knew how to turn on the charm. Carlotta was no pushover. But then again, she had a gift for seeing value where others saw none.

Maybe she saw something in Johnny the same way she'd seen, beneath the grit and grime, the real beauty in that old vanity.

Chapter 33

The woman led Nurse Steve into a small home office. “My father will be right with you. Please make yourself comfortable here in the study.”

“Thank you, I will.” Steve sat on the sofa, a massive leather number arrayed with buttoned dimples. He set his messenger bag on the floor. “Are you sure my bike’s okay on the porch?”

The woman made a face. “Of course it’s fine. Can I get you anything to drink, Mr. . . . ?”

“Olfato, but please, call me Mark.”

“Coffee? Water?”

“Water would be great, thanks.”

She left and Steve looked around the ‘study.’ He shook his head. She couldn’t just call it an ‘office;’ she needed to fancy it up. These Forest Hill snobs were all alike. What did she call the living room? The ‘parlor’?

The room glowed comfortably with recessed lighting. Everything was made of oak: the gigantic desk, layered with journals and notebooks; the twin file cabinets; and the bookshelves that lined every wall, stuffed floor to ceiling with books and binders. It sure beat Steve’s home office, a closet with the door removed.

The room darkened slightly. An old man the size of a bear stood in the doorway, blocking the light. “Mr. Olfato?”

Steve stood and extended his hand. “Dr. Ludovich. Thank you for seeing me.”

The old man gripped Steve’s hand firmly but without challenge. “Of course. I’m glad to be of help.” He spoke with the slightest trace of an accent. “By the way, my name is properly pronounced Luh-DAW-vich.”

“Dr. Luh-DAW-vich,” Steve repeated. “Sorry.”

“It’s quite all right.” The doctor walked stiffly to a leather wingback chair near the door. As he sat down, he pulled the chain on a floor lamp. He looked comfortable in baggy corduroy pants and a cardigan. Steve imagined this was

how he spent his hours, sitting in his chair, reading in the yellow lamplight. “So, my daughter tells me you may have a sleepwalker on your hands?”

“Yes sir, we have a patient who has been diagnosed as schizophrenic, but then I recalled your article in the JAMA—”

“You are referring to ‘Sleep Disorders Presenting as Psychoses,’ I believe?” The doctor leaned forward and closed his eyes.

“Yes, and—”

“But you are not a psychiatrist yourself?”

“No, I’m an occupational therapist.” Steve had thought of masquerading as a doctor, but figured he’d never be able to pull it off. “Anyway, this patient exhibits the same patterns as Patient Alpha in your study, and I’m afraid he may be similarly misdiagnosed.”

The woman reappeared with a tray. Water for Steve and a steaming mug of tea for the good doctor. “You’ve met my daughter? Three grown sons, and now she has to take care of her decrepit old father.” The woman patted the doctor on the shoulder and left. He blew steam off the mug and nodded at Steve. “So, tell me more about this patient of yours.”

Steve’s research on Charles Claibourne had not been going well. Everywhere he looked—hospitals, clinics, blood centers—turned up a big fat zero. Then, around 2 AM Saturday morning, he was about to call it a night, but decided to run one more Internet search. The man had gone to Stanford, so Steve searched on Claibourne AND Stanford.

Nothing. Or rather, too much. Hundreds of hits. The Claibournes and Stanford University had a relationship going back generations.

Steve stifled a watery yawn. But just before the Web page disappeared behind a wet blur, the word ‘sleepwalking’ jumped off the screen. Steve blinked until his vision cleared, then searched on Claibourne AND sleepwalking. The top link took him to an ancient campus scandal sheet from 1982 that some thoughtful person had scanned and uploaded.

ONE TOO MANY KAMIKAZES? After the TDX mixer Saturday, none other than campus pool shark Charlie Claibourne was found wandering barefoot around downtown Palo Alto in a daze. Again! Charlie claims he was just sleepwalking (honesht, ociffer!) but anyone who was at the mixer knows the real cause. BANZAI!!!

Steve read it three times. Again?

He hacked into the local law enforcement databases. Bingo! As a young Stanford student, Charles Claibourne had been picked up by the police twice in Palo Alto and three times in Menlo Park. On two occasions, he'd been released into the custody of one Dr. Maurice Ludovich.

Interesting.

The only Dr. Ludovich that Steve could dig up had been connected with the Stanford Sleep Disorders Clinic. Ludovich broke with the university in 1978, three years before Claibourne's nocturnal adventures, and opened his own private clinic in San Mateo. No reason for the break was specified, though references to a 1979 lawsuit, Ludovich v. Stanford University et al., indicated a less than amicable separation.

Steve kept digging, adrenaline surging through his veins. This was way more exciting than looking up old prescriptions and gonorrhea diagnoses.

Ludovich had published widely, but one 1984 article from The Journal of the American Medical Association snagged Steve's attention: ““Sleep Disorders Presenting as Psychoses.”” But only the abstract was available, and it wasn't very informative.

Steve couldn't sleep. He was close and he knew it.

First thing the next morning, he rode his bike straight to the library at UC Med. He was the first one inside when they opened the doors at 10 AM. Fifteen minutes later, he had the JAMA article in his hands. It was all there.

Pay dirt!

“Yes, Doctor. Um, well, our patient is mid-thirties, professional, unmarried, and otherwise very healthy. No known history of mental illness.”

Dr. Ludovich nodded. “Yes, yes. What did you say his current diagnosis is?”

This was the part Steve had been dreading, the part he'd spent three hours immersed in psychiatric texts to prepare for. “Yes, well, the working diagnosis is a mild form of schizophrenia, but I'm skeptical because he doesn't exhibit the, um, dissociation typical of schizophrenia. As was the case with your Patient Alpha.”

“Perhaps, but you're not a psychiatrist. If you were, you would know that dissociation can present itself in many subtle ways. It's not always so black and white, yes?”

Nyeh nyeh nyeh you're not a psychiatrist. What was it with this guy? Steve swallowed his annoyance. “Yes sir, you're right. I'm not a psychiatrist. But like

Patient Alpha, our patient also has a history of frequent somnambulism. He routinely leaves his home and has been known to wander up to several miles away. From what I've read, this is very rare, as most somnambulants engage in task-focused activities and almost never leave their homes."

Steve was just pulling things from the JAMA article and applying them to his fictional patient.

The doctor scratched his chine. "Yes, that's generally true. But there are exceptions to every rule. Tell me, have you spoken with the patient in his somnambulant state?"

"No, I work days. But I have consulted with the night staff and they have spoken with him on several occasions."

"Tell me, does he ever sing?"

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Never mind." The doctor shifted in his chair. "Let me guess. He engages others as a fully conscious person would, discussing their families and careers, even offering advice that can be characterized as useful and even insightful."

Now the doctor was quoting from his own article. Was he trying to trap Steve?

"Well, I don't know, sir. You'd have to ask the night shift."

"He never breaks into song? You're sure?"

The JAMA article never mentioned singing. The ability to engage in complex and extended personal interaction, however, was one reason the doctors had initially diagnosed Patient Alpha with Multiple Personality Disorder. In his waking state, he was unaware of his actions in the somnambulant state, but in his somnambulant state, the opposite was true. He was aware of everything that had happened when he was awake, and spoke of his waking identity as "a mask for the theater of life." Like "an over-imaginative child on Halloween," the masked self sometimes forgot the larger, truer self.

"He may have, sir, but no one's specifically mentioned it." Steve didn't know what to say.

"I agree, your patient is strikingly similar to Patient Alpha." The doctor's eyes darted to the file cabinets. "You say he is mid-thirties? Professional? Caucasian?"

Steve nodded. The direct correlation between Patient Alpha and Charles Claibourne had convinced him that they were the same person. Nineteen years

old. Stanford student. Upperclass family. Suffers from a sleeping disorder that manifests as an extreme form of somnambulism. On more than one occasion, the patient had been taken into police custody.

Steve needed the old doctor to make the same connection now.

Dr. Ludovich glanced at Steve's bag. "Fascinating. I don't suppose you brought his chart with you?"

Steve shrugged. "I'm sorry. Those are confidential medical records. I couldn't possibly... You understand."

"Yes, of course." The doctor regarded Steve. "Well, I'm not sure what I can do for you without examining the patient or reviewing his case file. What were you hoping for?"

That you'd spill the name of Patient Alpha. Steve realized how stupid and naive his plan had been. Did he really think a psychiatrist would breach confidentiality so casually? Now the conversation was winding down, and he had nothing. Nothing.

"Well, your article didn't make any recommendations regarding occupational therapy. I was wondering if you could suggest—"

The doctor was shaking his head vehemently. "I couldn't. Not without a proper diagnosis. But what I can do..." He pulled reading glasses from the pocket of his cardigan and reached over to the desk for a pen and notepad. "You said you were concerned this patient is misdiagnosed, and I believe you may be right. If you like, I can contact the treating physician and recommend a reevaluation."

Steve tried to conceal his defeat. "That would be great."

Dr. Ludovich looked at him expectantly, glasses perched on the tip of his nose. "Are you going to give me the doctor's name?"

"Oh, sorry." Steve could remember only one name from the SF General Hospital Web site. "That would be Dr. Baumer."

Dr. Ludovich pulled off his glasses. "You mean Phil Baumer?" He pronounced it Boy-mer, not Bow-mer the way Steve had. "He's treating this patient personally?"

"No, but um, you know, he's in charge and all." Shit.

Dr. Ludovich nodded and started to write on the notepad. He stopped and shook the pen theatrically. "Wouldn't you know... Out of ink." He stood up. "Stay here. I'll be right back." He walked out with a hurried shuffle.

Shit shit shit shit! He was probably calling that Baumer asshole right now. And then the cops. SHIT!

Steve stood up. He was so close. Patient Alpha was Claibourne and Claibourne was Patient Alpha. He knew it, but he needed the proof, documentation.

The filing cabinet.

Steve pointed his ears at the hallway. All quiet. He crouched down and gripped the handle of the drawer marked A-E and pulled slowly, the low rumble vibrating into his fingers.

Claibourne! Right there! Right fucking there!

The file was four inches thick.

Shit!

There was another folder within the Claibourne folder: Correspondence. He pulled it halfway out and flipped through the pages. Mostly letters on Noyes, Bittner & Schoenfeld letterhead. Steve scanned a few of the letters.

Pay dirt!

Grab Correspondence folder. Close drawer gently, no sound. Slip folder in messenger bag. Pull bag onto shoulder. Breathe. Brush wrinkles from pants and shirt. And walk out of there like James Bond.

“Mr. Olfato! Where are you going?” The daughter shouted from the end of the hall.

Steve was at the front door. “Thanks for everything but I must be going now!”

Out the door. Onto the bike. Down the hill and away.

Yes!

Chapter 34

Tommy had just locked up the Jetta and was rushing to Building Six of the TDM complex when Carrie called.

“So, when were you planning to fill me in? I thought we were friends, Tommy! I thought we were a team!”

Tommy was confused. No way the Claibourne story had made the news yet.
“How did you hear about it?”

“You’re joking, right?” Carrie sounded shocked. “That press release had the Delacroix touch all over it!”

B’Winki. TDM.

“Oh, that.” Tommy recalibrated. “Well, that’s in the hands of a PR firm now.”

The line was silent, but Tommy could feel the surge coming.

“Goddammit! You couldn’t give me a heads- up? You couldn’t throw me a freaking bone?”

“What do you care? You’re on a weekly news cycle. You don’t handle headline news. You don’t even handle international news.”

Carrie’s voice dropped. “That’s right. *The Weekly Watch Dog* doesn’t. Ahem.”

Tommy laughed. “You’re joking, right? This is how you plan to get back into CNN’s good graces?”

“Always! So what’s the real story there, anyway? Got any inside dope?”

“Well. . .” Tommy thought about the scanned email, which actually might carry some weight over at CNN. If he was going to release it to anyone, it might as well be Carrie. If he could do so without exposing himself.

To access the scan, she’d have to use an anonymous computer, maybe from the library or an Internet café, any IP address that couldn’t be traced back to her or *The Dog*, which would point the finger straight back to Tommy. If found out, he’d never work in high tech again, whistle-blowing being something of a red flag to recruiters. His ass would have to absolutely, positively, one -hundred percent covered.

Tommy swerved around the smokers outside the entrance and pushed through into the lobby.

“Well, actually, there’s a document—”

She sucked in air. “Tommy, what are you saying? Are you serious?”

“Hold on a sec.” Tommy passed his keycard over the security gate sensor. BRAMP. He tried again. BRAMP. A security guard, at least ten years younger than Tommy, came over with a clipboard.

“Thomas Delacroix?” He pronounced it Delacrocks.

“Let me call you back.” Tommy pressed End and pocketed the phone. “What’s up?”

The guard looked him over. “May I see a photo ID, please?”

“Is something wrong?” Tommy adjusted his shoulder bag and pulled out his wallet and driver’s license.

The guard looked at the license, then at Tommy. “Thank you.” He spoke into a walkie-talkie. “Howard? I have a Thomas Delacroix in the lobby.”

There was a static and scratchy instruction.

“Ten-four.” The guard tipped his head toward the elevators. “Follow me, please.”

Shit. Tommy took a deep breath and counted to ten. It couldn’t be. He’d been careful. Right?

In the elevator, Tommy asked, “So, what’s going on?”

The guard shrugged but didn’t take his eyes off the digital floor counter. “Standard operating procedure. There was a security breach.”

“A breach? What kind of breach?”

“I’m sure they’ll explain everything upstairs.”

When they arrived, another guard escorted Tommy to Strawberry Fields.

“Wait here.” The guard paused in the doorway. “Do you have any portable storage media on your person?”

“Excuse me?”

“Floppy disks. Zip disks. Anything like that?”

“Nope.”

The guard eyed Tommy's bag, but said nothing and left. The latch clicked loudly, and Tommy was alone with only the washed-out visages of the Fab Four to keep him company.

Did they find the scan on his computer? What do you think, John?

Highly unlikely, mate. You never wrote the file to your drive, only the Zip disk. Which you wisely reformatted, so there's nothing they could recover even if they knew where to look. You're sitting rather pretty, if you ask me.

Okay, then. But what's this breach all about? Paul, any ideas?

It doesn't matter, because whatever it is, you're not involved. You're as mystified as the next guy. That's the way to play this, Tommy. As mystified as the next guy.

Good thinking. Too much curiosity would only raise suspicion. George, did you want to add anything?

May I suggest that this would be a good time to stop talking to the pictures on the wall? Talk about raising suspicion, old chap!

Before Tommy could consult Ringo, a harried Claude entered the room. His cardigan sagged loose on his frame, as if he'd shrunk. He sat across from Tommy and ran his fingers over his balding pate.

"Sorry for all the hassle, Tom."

"Forget it. What's this all about?"

Claude raised his hands in what-can-you-do exasperation. "Just a minor security breach but there's a whole set of protocols we're required to follow."

"Was there a break-in?"

"Oh no, nothing like that." Claude hesitated. "It's all good, though. We'll be able to go back in very shortly. They're just clearing out their equipment."

Equipment. Tommy didn't like the sound of that. He pictured cables plugged into every port on his computer, reconstituting the illicit scan from random bytes. His phone chirped and he lifted it out of his pocket just enough to see the screen.

Carrie.

"Sorry." He pressed Ignore.

Claude continued. "Nigel's called an emergency meeting for 11:30. It's probably going to run well past lunch. You don't have to go. Just keep your head down for the rest of the day."

“Sure.” Tommy relaxed. He was in the clear.

Claude cleared his throat. “You’re late today.”

“Hmmm?”

“You’re late. Any specific reason why?”

“Oh. Right. Carlotta was away for the weekend. She just came back this morning, just as I was leaving. So I stayed behind for a late breakfast.” The lie came easily, almost before Tommy could even formulate it. Tommy knew that Claude was fond of Carlotta, and that the mere mention of her name quickly disarmed him. “You know how it is.”

“Sure, sure.” Claude’s mind already seemed elsewhere. Onto bigger worries.

Tommy’s phone chirped again. With a couple of clicks, he turned the ringer off. “I tried to call Tatanisha but I couldn’t get through to her or her voicemail.”

Claude stiffened. “Listen, Tom, one more thing. Related to the breach. We had to fire Tatanisha.”

Tommy’s stomach dropped. She was the most capable person on the whole team. “What? Why? I mean. . . Can they just fire her like that?”

“She’s the one who put the packets together. She exposed sensitive information.” He leaned forward. “Not on purpose, of course, but Nigel was adamant.”

“Nigel.” Tommy shook his head. Claude could finger Nigel all he wanted to, but there was only one way that Nigel could know who put the packets together. Claude, that rat bastard, like he wasn’t responsible for everything that went into the packets. Why man up and take responsibility when it’s easier to fire the black chick?

“Don’t worry about her. She’s getting a very generous severance package.”

Tommy knew what that meant. No one got severance without signing a broad set of waivers and promises to not sue the company for any reason. ‘Severance package’ was a misleading term; it sounded like a gift in wrapping paper. Payoff would be more accurate.

“What was it?” Tommy asked.

“What was what?” Claude’s face pinched in confusion.

“The breach. What exactly got exposed?”

Claude smiled. “I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

Tommy faked a chuckle. “In that case, never mind.”

The door thumped with a knock. A security guard leaned in. They were all done. Tommy followed Claude out of Strawberry Fields, a hateful anger boiling up from his gut. Claude's ass should be on the line, not Tatanisha's. What a piece of dogmeat!

"Okay, Tom, so let's touch base later, after I meet with Nigel."

"Sounds good, Claude." Backstabbing coward.

Claude paused outside his door. "This will all blow over soon enough. We just need to keep our heads down until it does."

"Got it, Claude. No worries." Venal piece of shit.

"Great. We need to be on the same page, Tom." Claude pointedly looked into his eyes. The message was clear. We don't want to end up like Tatanisha.

"I said, I got it."

Claude disappeared into his office and Tommy headed for his cubicle. His cell phone showed seven missed calls, all from Carrie. He couldn't call her now, not with all this breach hullabaloo. Maybe he couldn't call her ever.

Tommy powered up his computer, glancing around his work area for signs of tampering. Nothing looked out of place. Even the dust on the shelves looked undisturbed. The photo with Carlotta from Lake Tahoe was still in the scanner. Still, he wondered about hidden microphones and cameras. He told himself they'd probably focused on Tatanisha's cubicle. He tried to relax.

His phone chimed. Carrie, again. He sighed and pressed Ignore. Deep inside, of course, he knew he couldn't keep pressing Ignore forever.

Chapter 35

At lunch time, Tommy headed for the deli at the far end of the TDM campus. As he wound his way through the park-like setting, he called Carlotta. She was driving.

“Hello.” Still mad, from her tone.

“Hey, honey.” Tommy cleared his throat. “How’s your day going?”

“Mmm. Did you get to work okay?”

“Yeah. Things are a little upside down here.” He told her about the security breach and Tatanisha. Again, he omitted any mention of the scan. For her own protection, of course.

Tommy changed the subject. “What time do we have to meet your Mom and Burt tomorrow night? Do we need to pick them up?”

“No, they’re renting a car for the drive up to Napa. They want to eat early, so they can get to their bed-n-breakfast before dark.”

“How early?” Tommy was almost at the deli, so he sat on a bench to finish the call. The campus was landscaped with duck ponds and willow trees, the walkways dotted with goose poop.

“How soon can you get home from work tomorrow?”

“The thing is, I have that lunch meeting with Sally Mayfield in the city.”

“Just take the day off. All this craziness at work, Claude will understand.” Carlotta’s voice shifted. “Besides, if the lunch goes well, who cares about TDM anyway?”

“Won’t that look suspicious, though?” The hard wood of the bench bit into his back.

“Suspicious? What do you mean?”

Tommy swallowed. “No, nothing. I’m just saying.”

“And besides, you never call in sick or take a personal day.”

Tommy told her that he’d do it. It would be good to not have to rush to meet Sally. “How’s Johnny? What did you two wind up doing?”

Carlotta laughed. "Oh, he told me all about you, boy! I had no idea what kind of man I was marrying."

"I deny everything." Tommy smiled. She seemed to be lightening up.

"Uh-huh." She paused and her voice got quiet. "Actually, he can be a little hard to follow sometimes, he tends to go off on tangents, but he's very sweet."

"No kidding. Did he tell you anything about last night?"

"Well, yes, but. . ." The line got quiet. "I'm not really sure what to believe. I mean, hello, it all sounds so fantastic, but. . ."

"But?"

"Well, let's just say that I hope you can clarify a few things for me."

"Honey, I don't know what he told you, but trust me, it's not as fantastic as he probably made it sound." Then he remembered Greta and the Paradise Lounge, the park and Sabrina, Claibourne and Guardino, the coyote and the diner. "On the other hand, it may be a whole lot weirder than you could ever guess."

"What? You're breaking up."

"I'm sorry. Never mind. What exactly did he tell you?"

The sounds of braking and clutching came over the line. "Listen, I'm almost at work. Let's talk about it tonight. We can cook something together."

"Okay, I'd like that." Tommy had missed cooking with her the night before.

"Where's Johnny now?"

"I dropped him off in Presidio Heights."

"That's a bit out of the way, isn't it?" Presidio Heights was across town from the Mission.

"We ate on Clement Street." Carlotta paused. "I understand why you like him. He never asks for anything, but you almost can't not want to help him."

"Yeah, he has a lot of charisma."

"Honey, I'm pulling into the parking garage. We can talk later, if—" Already her voice was fading.

"Carlotta! Why Presidio Heights? What did he say?"

". . ."

"Sweetie?" She was gone.

Tommy wondered what business Johnny could have over in Presidio Heights. He leaned back on the bench, feeling bad about withholding from Carlotta, not telling her about the scan. In truth, he wasn't trying to protect her so much as himself. Because Tommy knew that if that email was leaked, at some point Claude would call Carlotta and put her feet to the fire.

Was it Tommy? Did he say anything about this to you?

Tommy wanted her to be able to honestly deny any knowledge. Plausible deniability. Not that he didn't trust her to lie for him. He did; just not convincingly.

And then Tommy would be exposed and blackballed and that would be the end of his cushy writing gig and all future cushy writing gigs.

If that happened, how would Carlotta respond? Could anyone, even Tommy, blame her for breaking off the engagement? In a way, he was betraying her, too, and all her expectations, all their shared plans and dreams. The kids, the house, the golden retriever. All in the toilet because he'd no longer be the Talented Copywriter with the Bright Future but One Seriously Broke-Ass Whistleblower.

As for Carrie, even if she obtained the scan, Tommy would still get screwed. Hell, all they'd need would be a basic background check on all the people who'd seen the packets at the meeting.

What about this Thomas Delacroix? What do we know about him? What? He used to be a journalist for a commie news rag? Get his ass in here! Now!

Claude was right. The thing to do was to keep his head down. Forget about the scan, forget about Carrie, and just ride it out.

Tommy rocked himself forward, off the bench and onto his feet. The outdoor tables were full of patrons, their sandwich wrappers flapping like grounded seagulls.

Some people from Marketing called him over. They recommended the roast beef.

Tommy said it looked good, and went inside. He was starving.

Chapter 36

You open your eyes.

Broad avenues and mansions and the green shagginess of pine and eucalyptus. The breeze is salty and cool. You can feel the ocean. The scent lifts off the trees and perfumes the air. You breathe in and feel the energy dancing all around you. This is the Planet, this is the Moment, this is Home.

The sky feels closer here. Not big sky country like Montana or Wyoming where you grew up, but an immediate sky, like a low ceiling you can reach up and tap with your fingers. Hey, you angels! Quiet down up there!

Although you are wonderfully, delightfully lost, you know you are close. The Tug has brought you all the way here, to His doorstep. So close you're spinning like a compass at the North Pole.

You're not worried. You'll find Him the same way a ball finds the bottom of the hill or a river finds the ocean. The Tug is the ultimate form of gravity. And when you do, you'll bring Tommy to Him, too. That's the task He set for you, what He told you to do the night He gave you back your vision.

Someone you know is in danger. You have to save him.

Who? Who's in danger?

Listen. Someone you are close to. Someone who's helped you. Listen. . .

You didn't know the answer until the exact moment you said his name. Tommy?

And then you had a vision of Tommy, slipping further and further away, like a child wandering into the forest, blind to all the dangers hidden in the shadows.

Find him, John. Bring him to Me and we'll save him together.

You brought Tommy to the park and nothing happened. But that was okay. The Man warned you. It's not gonna be easy, John, so keep on trying. Three's the charm. To everything, turn turn turn. There is a season, turn turn turn.

The street dead-ends into a low wall; the tall green forest of the Presidio teems on the other side. The pine and eucalyptus trees sway and dance in the wind, the high branches swirling in a choreography of circles within circles, ripples within

ripples. Before you lost your sight, trees didn't dance like this. But they must have. They must have; you just didn't see.

You spend long moments watching the branches, until the beauty makes you weep. Again!

A thousand years later, you rouse yourself and walk back out to the main avenue. You're walking in a straight line, but inside you're swirling and spinning like the trees.

So close you can feel Him. You walk in circles, waiting for the Tug.

This way... Yes...

Chapter 37

The streets of Presidio Heights were empty.

“I’ll just be a moment,” Marta told the taxi driver, and ran up to the Claibourne mansion. She’d only been here twice before, both when she was still working for Mr. Claibourne Senior. The three-story Tudor loomed beyond the outer wall, larger than Marta remembered. She took a deep breath and pressed the intercom button at the gate.

No one answered so she pressed again, listening for the corresponding buzzing within the walls.

The intercom crackled. “May I help you?” A woman’s voice.

“Yes, it’s Ms. Sandoval, from Mr. Claibourne’s office.”

At the buzz and click, Marta pushed through into a bright courtyard and climbed the main steps. A massive oak door with ornate grille work swung open, and a stout African-American woman emerged. She looked reserved and elegant in a gray suit. Reading glasses dangled around her neck from a thin, gold chain.

“Ms. Sandoval, of course.” She smiled. “I’m Arlene Flannigan, Mr. Claibourne’s house manager. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, to have a face to put together with your voice.”

They shook hands.

“The pleasure is all mine.” Marta pulled the pharmacy bag from her purse and handed it to Ms. Flannigan.

“Thank you. Won’t you come in for a moment? I’ve just made a pot of coffee.” She chuckled. “Lord knows, he’s been drinking it as quickly as I can make it.”

“I’m sorry, but I really must run. My sister is in the hospital. . .”

“I understand.”

Marta hesitated. “How is he? How is he holding up?”

Ms. Flannigan sighed. “He’s very tired, the poor dear, but I expect he’ll feel better soon enough.” She held up the bag and smiled a taut smile. Her face tilted and she looked into Marta’s eyes. “How are you holding up?”

Marta suddenly felt all the weight of the last few days. She wanted to collapse into Ms. Flannigan's arms and cry and tell her everything. About her sisters, her mother, her ex-husband, little Lazlo. All the things pressing her into the ground. But Marta couldn't. She had to be the strong one.

"I'm fine," she said. "The taxi's waiting. Please give Mr. Claibourne my best regards. Tell him not to worry about the office."

"I will. Take care of yourself, Ms. Sandoval."

Marta hurried down the steps and out the gate without looking. She immediately collided with a large homeless man on the sidewalk. Her momentum pressed her up against him, like a wave crashing against a seawall. He had a silver beard and piercing eyes, and smelled like leather and coffee and earth all at the same time.

He stepped back. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

Marta ignored him and straightened her dress coat.

The homeless man stared at the Claibourne mansion. "Excuse me, but do you know who lives in this house?"

Marta clutched her purse and jumped into the cab.

The man loomed in the car window, rapping the glass with his knuckles, his hand brown and worn and as battered as an old work glove. "Ma'am, please. I'm just looking for a friend."

"Driver, please!"

The taxi glided forward. Marta exhaled as if she'd been holding her breath for hours. She told herself that she'd done everything possible for Mr. Claibourne for the day. In a few minutes, she'd be back at the hospital, holding Isabel's hand and praying for Lazlo.

She did not look back at the homeless man.

Chapter 38

When Tommy got home, Carlotta had already started dinner, pasta with fresh homemade sauce. She always made fresh sauce, her grandmother's recipe, which meant that she was cooking up about three gallons' worth in a big stainless steel pot. And she had to do the whole thing one-handed, since tradition required the cook to clutch a glass of red wine at all times.

No sooner had Tommy set his bag on the kitchen table, she kissed him and shoved a wooden spoon into his hand. "Keep stirring."

As they chitchatted about their day, Tommy felt Carlotta snaking her arms around his waist. She kissed him on the back of the neck and rested her head between his shoulder blades.

"So... you're not mad at me anymore?"

Her fingers turned into talons and she dug them into his belly. "A little." She released her grip. "But Johnny told me some things that reminded me why I love you."

"Uh-huh," Tommy said. "That's not your first glass of wine, is it?"

"Hey, keep stirring!" Carlotta let go of his waist and moved around to the side of the stove. "No sirree, but that's got nothing to do with it. Johnny told me about all the times you fed him, how you took him in when the weather was bad."

Tommy shook his head. "Honest, sweetie, aside from a few burritos, I just gave him leftovers from catering gigs. And I wouldn't call letting him camp in the garage the same thing as taking him in."

"Well, the way he tells it, you saved his life on more than one occasion." She lifted the lid off a pot of boiling water and dumped in fresh gourmet pasta from the gourmet grocery. "And I think you should consider the possibility that you actually helped another human being in this world. Most people ignore the homeless, but you did something concrete and real for Johnny."

Tommy smiled to himself. This morning. Carlotta had freaked out at the idea of Johnny having slept in her sleeping bag. Now she loved the guy.

“A lot of people in Cole Valley used to help him. I don’t know why he’s singling me out. The funny thing about Johnny is that after you know him, you don’t really think of him as a homeless guy.”

“I know!”

They were quiet for a moment, him stirring the pot, her monitoring the pasta. The kind of moment Tommy enjoyed most with Carlotta.

“Okay, Tommy.”

“Hmm?”

“So tell me about last night.”

Tommy shifted from one foot to the other and back again. “What did Johnny say?”

“He said a bunch of things, but they were all jumbled together. I really like the guy, but he’s not exactly the Great Communicator.”

Tommy chuckled. “Okay, let me tell it then.”

The wine bottle was empty and the dinner plates bloody with congealed sauce. Tommy had told Carlotta the whole story, from the hunch about the Paradise Lounge and Greta to the park and Sabrina, Claibourne and the cops.

Yet he kept thinking that he’d left out something crucial. Something Claibourne had said.

Tommy had resisted talking about the park because that would mean it was real. And if it was real, then he was probably insane, because it could not possibly be real. At one point during dinner, Tommy got out the chapbooks with the two-part message from Greta. Corroborating evidence. The really of those ballpoint words pressed into the cream-colored paper made him feel better.

Carlotta took a deep breath. “Wow. Did you guys really see a coyote?”

“Yeah, but it was close to the park. There’ve always been coyotes in the park.”

“Still, but how freaky!”

Tommy laughed. “Considering everything that happened, that’s the part you find freaky?” He understood, though. That was one part of the night that she could grasp and accept at face value.

Maybe she, too, was scared that the events in the park could be real.

“Yeah, well,” Carlotta said. “What do you think? Could this really be happening?”

“I dunno. It’s one thing to read about shit like this when it happened two thousand years ago—”

She cut him off. “You don’t have to go back that far. All kinds of freaky stuff happens in India. And in Greece back in the 1940s, there was this shepherd who could actually heal the sick.”

Tommy imagined that this was the sort of conversation Carlotta and her yoga buddies had after class. “Well, stories like that like, you know—”

“Tommy, I swear, this guy healed a lamb with four broken legs right in the courtroom!” Carlotta told him a story she’d read, and swore she’d find it for him on the Internet, a documented case where the local medical establishment had sued a shepherd for performing such miracles on people. He supposedly won his case by breaking the lamb’s legs, having the fractures confirmed by the suing doctors, and then, bam, healing the legs right in front of everyone in the courtroom.

“I didn’t know that Greek courtrooms accommodated farm animals. And jeez, did the lamb just lie still while the guy broke its legs?”

“Don’t be so cynical, Tommy.”

“I mean, just imagine the racket the poor little guy must’ve made!”

“Tommy—”

“Sorry, sorry. But okay, so maybe that stuff happens in India or Greece or wherever. The guys are always these ascetics who sit around and meditate and contemplate the universe all day.” Tommy cleared his throat. “That I can almost accept. But this guy in the park, do you know who he is?”

“Does it matter?”

“Doesn’t it?”

Tommy summarized Charles Claibourne’s many crimes against humanity. “The guy is evil. Isn’t there a saying somewhere about ‘from the fruit you shall know the tree’ or vice versa? Well, the Claibournes are one poisonous tree.”

“I don’t know, Tommy. Maybe you shouldn’t judge him.”

Tommy was flabbergasted. Not judge Claibourne?! He reached for the wine bottle, then was disappointed to find it empty.

“I mean, maybe you’re focusing too much on his past. I’m not trying to defend the guy. I’ve never even really heard of him before now.”

“What are you saying, then, sweetie?”

“I’m just saying,” she paused and smiled. “Just enjoy it, you know?”

“Enjoy what?”

“You’re in the middle of something weird, but not bad weird. There’s something cool about Johnny and this whole thing. Something magical. I think you’re lucky.”

Tommy frowned. “I don’t feel lucky. In fact, I’m starting to question my sanity.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

Carlotta was right about that. Tommy felt better.

“So, what’s next?” she asked.

“That’s a good question. I don’t know. I guess it depends on whether or not Claibourne was actually arrested last night. He’s a rich guy and part of the local power structure. They take care of their own.”

“No, I mean, what’s next for you?”

Tommy shrugged. “I haven’t thought too much about that. What else is there to do? Johnny’s eyesight seems to be a real miracle. Even with Claibourne involved, I don’t see a story here. Nothing *The Dog* would publish anyway, just because it’s too woo-woo far out and what real proof do I have about anything? I’d need both Johnny and Guardino, and I don’t see them helping out if it might hurt Claibourne. Even then, the potential for a lawsuit. . . Back in the day, Bryce might have gone ahead and published something this crazy, but the new owners seem pretty corporate.”

Carlotta nodded. “As in, risk averse?”

“Exactly.”

She drummed her fingers, a tight military riff. “I don’t know how you can ignore this, Tommy. It’s all so fantastic.”

This was not the reaction he’d expected from Carlotta. She was usually the grounded one while Tommy walked around with his head in the clouds.

“Okay, then. What do you think I should do?” Tommy smiled. “What should be the next item on my Action List?”

Carlotta snaked her hand across the table, winding among the wine glasses and plates to clasp his hand. She smiled.

“The only thing you can do. Await further instructions.”

Chapter 39

On Tuesday morning, Nurse Steve could barely keep from dancing in his chair in the SF Public Library. He had a couple of people still ahead of him in line, everybody waiting for their thirty-minute ration of Internet time. Normally he would be impatient.

But not today.

In a few minutes, he'd be reporting in and soon, maybe even that very afternoon, he would collect forty-five hundred dollars, the balance of his five thousand dollar fee.

Steve really needed the money, too. In his excitement after locking in the Claibourne/Patient Alpha connection—the stolen folder was full of threatening correspondence from Claibourne's lawyer, trying to block publication of the JAMA article—Steve had gone on a spending spree. He'd bought a new computer and a twenty-inch monitor, plus his new pride and joy, a Bianchi Italian racing bicycle so light he could lift it with a single finger.

The clerk checked the list and looked at the people waiting.

“Gregor Sobinski?”

Steve relaxed. He hated having to wait for a lousy computer, but he admired the caution exercised by his new clients. *Use a computer that can't be traced to you. Go to the CyberWars chat room any morning between eight and noon. Log in as AlteredBoy13. Wait for Sauron216 to invite you to a private chat.* Steve would have to get used to such skullduggery if he wanted to do more work for them. (Maybe they even had a new assignment waiting for him!)

“Mark Olfato?”

Steve took a second to remember that he was Mark Olfato. He went to the assigned cubby and logged in. The chat room was full of geeks role-playing in some kind of Star Wars/Dune hybrid, the typical Good vs. Evil Final Conflict, with warriors and dragons and elves with crossbows that fired photon darts. Steve could only chuckle. What a bunch of losers.

After a few minutes, a blue message appeared at the bottom of the screen: Sauron216 has invited you to a private chat in Alpha Centauri.

Steve clicked and entered.

Sauron216: Hail, good knight.

Steve took a deep breath. He'd been instructed to couch his messages in such geek speak. Fortunately, he'd read Lord of the Rings in high school.

AlteredBoy13: Hail, Sauron216! I bring great news! I have completed my quest and captured the trophy you requested.

Nothing appeared for a solid minute.

Sauron216: Alas, good knight, your services are no longer needed. The mighty dragon has fallen from the sky all by himself.

AlteredBoy13: ????????

Sauron216: Oh, good knight, dost thou not read the papers?

Steve opened a new browser window and searched the news for Charles Claibourne. Dozens of blue headlines filled the page.

LOCAL SOCIALITE SNARED IN HOMELESS SWEEP

POWER BROKER BY DAY, FAITH HEALER BY NIGHT?

MAN NOT HELD FOR PSYCH. OBSERVATION

CLAIBOURNE: HISTORY OF SOMNAMBULISM

On and on. Steve scanned a couple of the top paragraphs, cringing to learn that Claibourne had been arrested before Steve had stolen his file.

AlteredBoy13: This is good news. I congratulate you. Nonetheless, I completed my quest at great risk for you. Do I not deserve my reward?

The screen remained blank, the cursor winking on and off, on and off.

AlteredBoy13: What about my money???

No response. Then, in blue text:

Sauron216 has logged out.

Chapter 40

Marta squinted, trying to discern her sister through several glass partitions. Two chambers away, Isabel leaned over Lazlo's incubator in the NICU. Though she wore a surgical mask and gown, Marta could still read her distress. Marta had never seen Isabel, the one who went to war in the desert, look so fragile and frightened.

She needs to eat, Marta thought. We can't lose her, too.

Too? Marta sank, ashamed by the realization that she'd already accepted the inevitability of Lazlo's death. Her prayers had already shifted from her nephew to her sister.

The office cell phone chirped in her purse. Again. Calls had been coming in all morning. Clients cancelling meetings. Mr. Garfield had been first, requesting that Mr. Claibourne cease all fund-raising activity and to forward the latest donor data to the mayor's campaign offices. The venture capital organization uninvited Mr. Claibourne to their dinner. More than a dozen similar cancellations already, and it was not yet eleven in the morning.

Mr. Claibourne's arrest must have made the news.

The cancellations were not limited to Mr. Claibourne's special clients. Several secretaries and account managers from the office had called in a panic. Their clients were cancelling, too.

Marta pressed Ignore. She'd check the messages later. Dr. Spungen appeared down the hall. Marta trotted towards him.

"Marta."

"Doctor."

He looked down. "I'm sorry."

His words hit her like a wave. Her knees almost gave out and she grabbed Dr. Spungen's wrist for support. He took her by the elbow and guided her to a chair.

Marta searched for the words. "I asked you earlier about bringing Lazlo to Isabel's room, so he can be with us? When his time comes?"

Dr. Spungen nodded. "Yes, of course. I've expressed your wishes to Dr. Burundi, his pediatrician. But you know, Marta, it's not that simple."

"We don't want him to die here! Alone! In a plastic box!"

"Calm down, Marta. It shouldn't be a problem, but there is a process."

Marta stood. She crossed her arms and arched her back. Taking a deep breath, she summoned all her powers. "Perhaps I can ask Mr. Claibourne to speak directly to the hospital administration? Perhaps they'll move a little faster for him, seeing that the Claibourne family has donated so much money to this hospital."

"Now, Marta, there's no need to play hardball. Trust me when I tell you we're doing everything we can." Dr. Spungen scratched his chin. "Then again, it might not hurt to mention your close association with the Claibournes."

Marta softened. "Please, Doctor. This may be the only time we'll have with him."

Isabel was coming out, so Marta shut up. It wouldn't help matters for Isabel to see her fighting with Dr. Spungen. And maybe Marta was being too hard on the poor man. He was only the OB/GYN. Technically, his work had ended when Lazlo was born, yet here he was, checking in on Lazlo in the NICU.

The nurse brought Isabel around. Back in the wheelchair, mask and gown gone. Isabel's eyes were puffy from the bottomless cry of the last few days. She smile weakly at Marta, then turned away, shaking her head.

Marta turned back to Dr. Spungen. "I'm sorry, Doctor, if I was short with you before. I am. But please, for her sake, hurry. Please."

Chapter 41

Tommy had never been inside Allez-Vous before, although once, as a bike messenger, he'd ducked under one of the restaurant's famous blue awnings to get out of the rain. The room on the other side of the glass looked warm and dry, with the chandeliers and tableware sparkling like cut light. Then his radio crackled and off he rode to his next pickup.

As Tommy now entered as a bona fide patron, he thought about that moment and how far he'd come. Not that the maître d' appeared to give a rat's ass, standing erect at his podium like a symphony conductor, sneer idling in neutral as he waited for Tommy's status to be determined. No doubt Tommy's off-the-rack suit had been instantly evaluated and found wanting.

"May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm meeting a friend for lunch." Tommy paused, oddly enjoying the expectation swelling the man's fat cheeks. "Sally Mayfield, of Hellebore & Crocell? My name is Thomas Delacroix."

The maître d' hesitated, glancing again at Tommy's suit before dipping his head in reluctant deference. "Very good, Mr. Delacroix." He pronounced 'Delacroix' better than Tommy himself. "Unfortunately, Ms. Mayfield phoned a few minutes ago to say she would be delayed. She asked that we make you comfortable until she arrives."

The dining room was almost full but the sound level hovered at an animated hush, like gentle surf against a calm shore. A waiter seated Tommy at a banquette, and asked him if he wanted anything. Tommy ordered a Perrier with a twist of lime.

Stuffed into a suit and sitting alone behind a large table, Tommy felt like a twelve-year-old at a wedding. He'd never expected to find himself lunching with a high-powered PR executive who wanted to recruit him because he'd inadvertently impressed her with his natural talent for defending evil multinational corporations accused of heinous crimes against humanity.

If only Carrie could see him now!

Of course, Tommy had no intention of taking the job, as much as he enjoyed the special attention from such bigwigs. The pay couldn't be that much better than at TDM, where he was turning a good dollar with lots of potential for improvement. The B'Winki business excepted, TDM still represented a much lesser evil. And they liked him. Tommy had a future there. His stock options were halfway vested, even if he wasn't exactly sure how that all worked. The last annual bonus had been sweet, too, like seven percent of his salary before taxes. Sure, this business with Tatanisha had left a bad taste, but things would get back to normal soon enough.

Sally's recruiting effort was flattering; Tommy felt like a minor leaguer being called up to the majors, a chance to play with the big boys. The least he could do was to hear what she had to say, before politely and delicately turning her down. Silicon Valley was a small place; their paths might cross again.

Carlotta would be disappointed. She was already imagining herself chit-chatting with Sally Mayfield at the Hellebore & Crocell holiday party.

Tommy's drink arrived, the light refracting like diamonds through the ice and bubbles. He took a sip. Delicious. The slash of lime provided an ideal edge of tartness.

"Thomas?" Sally startled him out of his trance. She greeted him with delight, as if they were the dearest of old friends. She was a sudden burst of life in the hushed restaurant. The light seemed brighter and everyone turned to look at her.

"Sally." Tommy slid out of the banquette to greet her properly. Her handshake was light and child-like.

"Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice." She wore a taupe blouse under a black suit. A choker of pearls completed the merger of elegance and professionalism.

"No worries."

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, but you know, I started to tell Rick about you and he wanted to meet you in person."

Stepping up behind Sally was a tall, lanky gentleman in his sixties, silver-haired but with the wiry gait of a former athlete. He, too, emanated elegance and professionalism, every hair perfectly cut. His suit was gray with fine, barely perceptible pinstripes.

Rick Crocell in the flesh! Tommy dumbly stuck out his hand. Crocell's grip was firm and challenging, but in a chummy way, like they were about to suit up for

squash. A hint of old school cologne tickled Tommy's nose.

Sally continued, "Rick Crocell, Tom Delacroix."

"An honor and a pleasure, sir."

"Please, just call me Rick." Crocell regarded Tommy with interest. "Have we met before?"

"Not formally, sir. Rick."

"Ah well, better late than never!"

They sat down, with Sally scooting into the middle.

"Well, Tom, you've certainly made quite an impression on our Sally here. That's not easy to do."

Sally chuckled. "I showed Rick your press release, and he was quite impressed. Not only with the content, but with how quickly you produced it."

Crocell nodded. "You have a natural talent, my boy. And the ability to think on your feet."

Tommy dipped his head. "You're very kind to say so, sir."

"Tell me, where did you learn to write?"

They'd no doubt run a background check, so Tommy couldn't lie. He could only spin and dissemble, and maybe that was what they wanted to see, him actually thinking on his feet. "Well, sir, I've been writing all my life. In fact, in high school, I wrote papers for my friends. I went to college on a partial scholarship for writing. I worked on the school paper and expected to go into journalism."

Crocell nodded. He probably was wondering how Tommy would handle his history at *The Dog*.

"I tried for some years to make a go at it, but I don't really have a head for hard news, if you know what I mean. I wrote for some weeklies, but. . . I don't know. Something was missing."

Tommy's new facility for lying was running like a brand new BMW. The corners of Crocell's mouth had relaxed, and he was nodding, eyes closed as if parsing each word.

"I felt out of place and not the least bit satisfied," Tommy continued. "I've never really verbalized it before, but I guess I was searching for the right kind of work."

Crocell smiled like a kindly old uncle. “I understand, Tom. It’s important for a man to find meaningful work. His right livelihood.”

“Exactly! I didn’t really feel at home until I started working at TDM. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was making a contribution, and was truly appreciated.”

Sally set her hand on Tommy’s wrist. “You should see some of the work Tom’s done for the United Land Conservancy. It’s brilliant.”

The waiter came over with menus, but Rick waved him away. “No thanks, I won’t be staying. I’m going to let these kids talk business.”

Crocell stood, prompting Tommy to stand, too. He shook Tommy’s hand, the same grip as before. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Tom. I think Sally is right about you and I hope she can convince you to join our team. I admire your loyalty to TDM, but you might be surprised how much more. . .” He winked like they were in on the same joke. “How much more appreciated you can be at Hellebore & Crocell.”

Tommy remained standing until Crocell was gone. “Well, he certainly seems nice. Sally, I just want to say how honored I was when you called, but I, uh—”

Sally ignored him and opened her menu. “Can we go ahead and order? I had a spinning class this morning and I’m starving.”

Chapter 42

Marta took her customary spot in the hospital cafeteria and set up her work area. Legal pad and pens to the left, the printout of Mr. Claibourne's calendar to the right. She arranged her laptop in the middle and powered up.

She sipped her coffee and relaxed, happy to be away from her mother and Isabel, to have a chance to disappear into her work for half an hour. What could she do anyway? They were just waiting to hear from Dr. Burundi.

She felt guilty about feeling good, but work had always been her escape. Work had saved her when Hector abandoned her and saved her again when he came back.

The abandonment had been hell, true hell, but Marta was never the kind to sit and lick her wounds. She gave herself one month to cry, then re-enrolled at San Francisco State to finish her degree. After graduating early, she sped through the certification process to become a legal secretary. Drake Noyes had been her first boss, and on her twenty-fifth birthday, she started working for Mr. Claibourne Senior.

Then Hector came back. Not for Marta. He was already living with another woman in the South Bay. Marta was surprised, even amused. Oh, he'd left full of declarations about how Marta was holding him back, how he was worthy of greater things, how that greater destiny was just waiting for him to unburden himself of the worthless, barren woman he'd been stupid enough to marry.

A rented tract house in Union City, Hector? Is that your greater destiny?

Mr. Claibourne Senior remarked, "It's true that living well is the best revenge, is it not? He's the same ne'er-do-well who left you five years ago, but here you are, firmly established in your career, the owner of a three-unit building in one of the best real estate markets in the nation."

Of course, Marta's success was precisely what had drawn Hector back into her life.

"Hey, baby, you've really had some good luck."

"Good luck nada! Everything I have, I achieved through my own hard work, not that you'd understand the concept."

“Good luck, hard work. It doesn’t matter. One concept I do understand is community property. What’s yours is mine, till death do us part, baby.”

Someone had told him about the building Marta had bought to house her mother and her sister and their families. And that after seven years, she could divorce him for abandonment and he would have no claim over her property.

At first, Marta had said nothing to Mr. Claibourne, but one day he interrupted a dictation to ask if something was the matter. She broke down and told him everything. She was immediately ashamed, but Mr. Claibourne just laughed.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Sandoval. Let’s get Drake on the line and see what our options are.”

Our options. Marta was touched.

As soon as word leaked out that the Claibournes were standing behind Marta, Hector couldn’t find anyone to represent him. A lawyer from out of town eventually took his case, but Drake quickly swamped him with motions and a counterclaim that, unless dropped, would require a detailed reckoning of Hector Reyes’s finances, past and present. Drake Noyes informed the attorney that Mr. Reyes had abandoned not only Marta but several outstanding credit card balances. Drake also hinted that Mr. Reyes’s debts extended also into the criminal sphere, which might be less procedure-oriented in seeking redress.

Towards the end, an enraged Hector burst into Claibourne & Sons, causing a real panic in reception. Mr. Claibourne told the staff to allow Mr. Reyes entry, but only under escort by security.

Mr. Claibourne intercepted Hector at Marta’s desk and shook his hand. “Mr. Reyes, I’m pleased to finally make your acquaintance. Won’t you please come in?”

One of the security guards spoke up. “Mr. Claibourne, sir, with all due respect
—”

“It’s all right. Mr. Reyes is a reasonable man. Aren’t you, Mr. Reyes?”

Hector, completely confounded, looked from the genial Mr. Claibourne to the security detail and back again. Marta understood his confusion. Hector was no stranger to being escorted from the premises, so what was the old man up to?

“And reasonable men can have a reasonable conversation. Right, Mr. Reyes?”

Hector nodded as Mr. Claibourne led him into the inner office. Marta tried to follow, but Mr. Claibourne shut the doors behind him. She waited with the

security guards, who were clearly uncomfortable leaving their boss alone with a man in such an agitated state. Marta agreed and offered them coffee.

After only a few minutes, the double doors swung open and the two men came out. Mr. Claibourne was effusive, patting Hector on the back, talking about how happy he was that they'd been able to come to an agreement.

Hector looked shrunken and gray. His gaze was unfixed and he walked slowly, as if injured.

Mr. Claibourne instructed the security detail to escort Mr. Reyes to one of the outer conference rooms. Drake Noyes was sending over some documents that required Mr. Reyes's signature. Would they be so kind as to keep him company until the documents and the notary public arrived?

On his way out, Hector didn't even glance back at Marta.

Marta looked at Mr. Claibourne. "What did you say to him?"

Mr. Claibourne adjusted his cufflinks and brushed nonexistent dust from his sleeves. "I simply clarified the situation. The poor fellow! No one had taken the trouble to illustrate how things would play out. In detail. Believe me, my only intention was to spare the man needless heartache. Once he was fully informed, he quickly agreed that a dissolution of the marriage with a quit claim on all community property was in his own best interest."

Marta didn't know how to respond. "Sir. . . I—"

Mr. Claibourne raised his hand. "No need, Ms. Sandoval. After that business, however, I need a drink. Would you be so kind?"

"Of course, sir!" Marta entered the inner office and opened the bar, which was concealed behind the paneling by the sitting area. She poured his usual: scotch, neat, in a cut crystal tumbler.

Drink in hand, he sank into the leather sofa and sighed. "That was quite a spectacle, wasn't it, Ms. Sandoval?"

Marta had to admit that it was.

Her laptop up and running, Marta hesitated before opening Mr. Claibourne Junior's calendar. She wondered why she was thinking about his father, her old boss, and got a bad feeling. She made a mental note to call the nursing home and check in on him.

Marta listened to the messages, marking off the cancellations directly in the calendar. The month slowly turned from green to gray. She told herself that it

was just as well; the poor man needed time to recover from the arrest and embarrassment. She hoped the cancellations were only temporary.

She didn't want to think about how Mr. Claibourne would take it. That morning, when she'd called him about Mr. Garfield and the mayor's campaign, the news hit him hard. Not that he said so, but Marta heard it in his voice, in his lack of response. He asked no questions and ended the call quickly.

"I'm sorry, I have to go. Thank you, Ms. Sandoval."

Mr. Claibourne sounded nothing like the man who, only a few days earlier, had been energized about opening a new office in Washington DC.

The lobbyists are calling the shots now. We can get right into the game.

Marta's cell phone rang again. The caller ID said STONEFLAG. Marta sighed and answered.

"Charles Claibourne's office. This is Ms. Sandoval."

"Marta? Hi, it's Melanie, Bradley Washburn's assistant? How are you?"

"Fine, Melanie. How are you? Did you receive the card? For the dog?"

"Yes! That was so thoughtful. It meant a lot to Bradley, too."

"I'm so glad, dear."

Melanie chuckled. "He really loves that dog. Anyway, I'm just calling to see if we can reschedule tomorrow's meeting?"

Reschedule. How many times had Marta heard that word today? "Of course. Any specific date in mind?"

"Actually, Mr. Washburn wondered if it might be possible to meet this afternoon?"

Marta was taken aback. Melanie wasn't kidding. And Mr. Claibourne's afternoon was wide open, thanks to all the cancellations. Marta thought about the presentation she'd prepared last Friday. It was close enough to ready. It had to be.

"Marta? Still there?"

"Yes, sorry. I was just opening his calendar." Marta wanted as much time as possible. It was almost noon. "Four o'clock is open. Would that work?" Marta held her breath.

"Four o'clock? One moment, please." The line was quiet, then: "Great, we'll see you at four!"

“See you then.” Marta let her breath out and updated the calendar. The green highlight for the Stoneflag meeting stood out like an evergreen in a field of dead weeds. Maybe they were going to get through this, after all.

Her cell phone chirped again. She didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello?”

“Marta? It’s Dr. Spungen.”

“Doctor! Do you have any news?”

“Yes, yes. Everything’s been arranged for Lazlo to be brought to your sister’s room.”

A warm wave crashed through Marta. “Oh, Doctor! Thank you! When?”

“Easy now, Marta. There are still a few hoops to jump through. I’ve had to arrange for two other doctors to confirm Lazlo’s terminal diagnosis. Then there are some administrative procedures. Your sister will have to sign some papers.”

“Of course, of course.” Marta closed her laptop and gathered her materials.

“How soon?”

“I think afternoon, early evening.”

The Stoneflag meeting was at four. She had to be there for Mr. Claibourne. But she had to be there for her sister. Maybe she could get back before they brought in Lazlo. Maybe Mr. Claibourne wouldn’t need her for the whole meeting.

“Marta?”

“Yes, Doctor. Sorry. I was just working through some logistics.”

“I understand.” Dr. Spungen paused. “Marta, I . . . I just want to say how sorry I am. I wish your sister and Lazlo. . .”

“It’s all right, Doctor. You did everything you could.”

“It’s never easy losing the little ones. You’d think that after thirty years, it would get easier, but it never does. It just gets harder.”

Marta sighed. The phone sagged with the weight of his sadness. “I’m sorry, too, Doctor.”

She said good-bye. She packed her things and rushed out of the cafeteria, punching Mr. Claibourne’s home number into the cell phone.

Chapter 43

Tommy ordered the Chicken Caesar and Sally some French dish that Tommy could neither pronounce nor recognize beyond zucchini with a thin brown sauce. They talked about TDM. Tommy tried to jazz up Claude's contributions and how Claude had given him his first real shot.

Sally chuckled. "Your loyalty to Claude Sansepine is really very endearing, Thomas. Don't get me wrong. We value loyalty at Hellebore & Crocell, we do. But you also have to know when to cut your losses."

Tommy got that falling-elevator feeling in his gut again. "What do you mean?"

Sally sipped her diet soda. "If I were you, I'd distance myself from Sansepine. He's going down soon and he's going down hard."

"Um." Tommy was happy that Claude would get his due, but felt immediately ashamed. Aside from the Tatanisha episode, Claude had been a good boss. He had taken a chance hiring Tommy. And he was an old friend of Carlotta's. He had a wife, kids, a mortgage.

"Seriously, Thomas. The guy can't be trusted to keep his own department secure. Firing the African-American woman was just a Band-Aid. The real cleanup hasn't even begun yet." Sally winked at him. "Not a bad time to pursue new opportunities."

Tommy nodded, a piece of chicken hard in his throat. "Yes, you're right."

"Whoever replaces Claude will bring in his own team. His own writers."

"Yes, of course." Tommy sipped his water, hoping to dislodge the chicken. Sally was right about how everything would play out. How could he have not seen it?

Tommy mentally calculated his stock options. Two more years and a couple months, and he'd be fully vested. The stock was currently forty percent over his strike price. The way the market was jumping, who knew how much higher the price would be in 2001?

Enough for a down payment on a house, certainly.

All gone. His stomach soured with an unfamiliar grief. The grief of losing something that had never been his, but would have been in some alternate

universe where he continued working at TDM. And all because of one stupid email written by a man he'd never meet in a country he'd never visit.

Fucking globalization.

Yet here was Sally Mayfield, offering him a new job in the nick of time. Maybe there was a God after all.

Tommy swallowed hard. The piece of chicken came loose.

"Okay, Sally. Maybe it is time to move forward. How would you see me fitting in at Hellebore & Crocell?"

Sally leaned back. "I'd like to bring you on as a Writer Level I. You've got a lot of raw talent, but you're unseasoned. You need to acclimate to our environment. The other writers in the bullpen will help you bring your game up to speed. At the same time, I think you'll be able to teach them a thing or two. We can see where it goes from there."

"Okay." Tommy wasn't crazy about the Writer I designation. "Where might it go from there?"

"You mean, what's the growth path?"

"Right."

Sally dabbed the corners of her mouth with her linen napkin. "The typical path would be up the set gradations—Writer I, Writer II, Writer III—up to Team Leader, if you prove your ability to lead other writers. However. . ." Her eyes narrowed.

Tommy smiled. "However?"

"I think you have greater potential. I've looked at a lot of your press releases, and they indicate advanced strategic thinking. For example, you saw that the B'Winki situation called for preemptive action. You can't learn that kind of instinct in business school."

Tommy found himself nodding, imagining himself with his sleeves rolled up, commanding a fancy conference room, the table littered with empty coffee cups and takeout food containers, he and his team hammering out an ironclad response to some looming crisis.

"But let's not jump the gun. Are you up for this? Hellebore & Crocell isn't a tech company. There's no foosball table in the rec room—and no rec room, either. The hours can be long and hard and there are a lot of egos knocking each other around."

“I imagine.”

“And something else.” Sally’s eyes hardened. “I’m not an idiot, Thomas. I researched your work for the newspaper and saw a lot of hippie politics. Anti-this and anti-that. That’s okay. I consider myself a liberal. I’ll be volunteering for Gore in the next election. In college, I marched against apartheid. Remember the big divestment movement?”

Tommy nodded.

“I was very involved in consciousness-raising on campus. Knocking on dorm room doors, handing out leaflets, getting signatures. So believe me, I’m sympathetic to progressive causes. But this is a business for grownups. You’ll find yourself defending positions that you might find personally abhorrent. I need to know that you can live with a certain amount of . . . of . . .”

“Cognitive dissonance?” Tommy offered.

She smiled and her eyes softened. “Exactly!”

Tommy nodded and swallowed. “Well, I think that by working for TDM, I’ve already demonstrated my ability to do just that. I mean, this B’Winki business kind of stinks, but that doesn’t keep me from doing my job, which is to present TDM in the most positive light possible.” For that last part, Tommy borrowed heavily from the personal mission statement that Claude had made him hammer out his first week at TDM.

He sipped his water.

“And let’s face it. You can’t live in our society without a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. You’d go insane.”

Sally laughed. She thought he was joking. She patted his arm. “Good answer, Thomas. Good answer.”

Her touch made Tommy blush, which he tried to hide by shrugging and laughing, too.

“You’ll have to make some other changes, too.” Sally glanced at his suit. “You’ll need to upgrade your wardrobe. Even though you’ll be based in SF, Hellebore & Crocell is a New York company and we have a New York mentality. We don’t do casual Fridays. You’ll need to look sharp every day and be ready to suit up at a moment’s notice.”

Tommy raised his hands in exaggerated protest. “You mean I’ll have to leave my Birkenstocks at home? I don’t know, Sally.”

Sally smiled. “Good. I like a sense of humor. We need more of that around the office.”

Tommy bet they did. A new plan was forming in his head. He’d play along with Sally, just in case she was right about Claude’s fate at TDM. Where else would he find a writing gig that paid nearly as much? He couldn’t go back to freelance work. He was getting married, and they wanted a house and kids, the whole package. Tommy needed a regular paycheck, and the larger the better.

If he found something else, he’d nix the deal with Sally.

She spoke before Tommy could say anything.

“We haven’t talked about salary yet.” She smiled and produced a Gucci pen and matching notepad from her purse. “I’m just guessing, but I’ll bet this is about what you’re getting at TDM.” She scribbled, then tore out the sheet and slid it face down across the satiny tablecloth.

Tommy lifted the edge of the sheet like a poker hand. Her guess was remarkably close, going over by two thousand dollars. Yet that overage stirred something within Tommy, 4.0 on the personal Richter scale. Right up to the very second he saw her scribbled guess, Tommy had thought his TDM salary was ample, even generous, to the point that he was getting away with something.

Now he felt cheated. Exploited. The figure on the Gucci notepaper was what he should’ve been getting paid.

“That’s about right.” Tommy slid the paper back to her.

Sally crossed out that figure and wrote another. “Here’s where you’d start.” She slid it back to him.

Tommy took a deep breath and peeked again. Rounding up, he figured it represented about a thirty percent increase.

With that kind of money, he could see the light at the end of the down-payment tunnel. Real estate prices were jumping, so the sooner he and Carlotta got into a place, the better. He could even afford a nicer car lease, maybe a Saab or a Beemer. They didn’t cost that much more.

“I see. Well—”

“Of course, that’s not including bonuses. Hellebore & Crocell believes in rewarding excellence.” Sally smiled and her eyes twinkled. “But wait, there’s more.”

She slapped her hand down on the slip and pulled it back. She wrote down more numbers. “That’s just for the first six months. It’s sort of a probationary period that everyone has to go through. If you prove yourself, and I mean prove yourself, we’d jump up to the middle grade, Writer II.”

Sally pushed the slip back to him.

Tommy was almost scared to look. The new value crossed over into six figures. Just barely, a toehold, but six figures it was. A comma with three digits to the left and three digits to the right.

“These figures are very competitive.”

Sally smiled but there was no light in her eyes. “Hellebore & Crocell didn’t get to be the best by shortchanging its talent. We’re a very person-oriented company because we know we’re only as good as the people on our team.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Sally put her hand on his wrist. Again. “I believe you’re Hellebore & Crocell material. You’re a little raw, a little inexperienced, but if you successfully apply yourself, there’s no telling how far you could go.” She retrieved the slip of paper. “After five to seven years, you could become a strategist. I told you before, I think you have the aptitude and instinct. How much do you think a strategist merits?”

“Sally, I couldn’t begin to guess.”

She scribbled yet another figure. This time, she flipped it over on the table. It was exactly triple his current TDM salary. Triple.

“Hmm.” Whatever his future at TDM was, or might have been, there was no way Tommy would ever rise to that pay grade. That was beyond Claude and approaching Nigel.

Of course, how much cognitive dissonance could he really stomach? Tommy couldn’t think about that now. TDM was no longer an option. Claude would be out, and Tommy right with him.

Sally took a deep breath. Tommy realized he’d been quiet for too long.

“I’m sorry, Sally. This is all very sudden.”

She crossed her arms and leaned forward. “Listen, I’m not here to screw around. I’m not here to beg you to please please come work for us. I’m here to offer you an opportunity because I think you have something to contribute to our efforts. You either seize that opportunity or you don’t. Say no, and you can go back to

writing newsletter blurbs and press releases for Granola International. But if you think you're ready to play in a man's game, say yes now. If I were you, I'd say yes quickly."

Tommy's cell vibrated, an audible buzzing. He groped the unfamiliar topography of his suit until he'd pressed enough buttons to make it stop. It immediately began vibrating again.

"Okay, yes. Quickly." He pulled out his phone. It was Johnny. Tommy pressed Ignore.

Sally smiled. "You're making the right decision. Lillian from HR will send you a formal offer letter by overnight mail. She'll include all the information about health insurance, 401(k), and so on. You can work out a start date with her.

The right decision. Sure. At least Carlotta would be happy. "Great, I'll look for it." His phone vibrated again.

Sally laughed. "Maybe you should get that."

"I think so. Excuse me for a moment." Tommy pressed Talk. "This is Tom Delacroix."

"Tommy! I found Him! I found His house!"

"Yes, John, hello." Tommy glanced at Sally, who was toying with her own phone. "That's good news." He covered the mouthpiece and whispered to Sally, "I'm going to take this over there. Excuse me."

Tommy slid out of the banquette and headed for the bathroom alcove. "Johnny? What the fuck are you doing? Where are you?"

"Presidio Heights! I found Him, Tommy! The Tug brought me right to Him!"

"Get the hell out of there. Don't go near him. Don't go near his house." Stalking Claibourne was a very bad idea, inviting trouble that even Guardino couldn't get Johnny out of.

"Tommy, don't you see what's going on yet?"

"Just tell me where you are."

"Presidio Heights. I told you. It's beautiful out here, Tommy. You can smell the ocean in the air and the Presidio is all green and full of trees. Dancing trees!"

Tommy had to get to him before the cops showed up. "Johnny, I need the cross streets. Look at the signs on the nearest corner."

"Hold on a sec. It just says Pacific Terrace."

Tommy's heart sank. Pacific Terrace was only the most exclusive cul-de-sac in San Francisco, a circle of mansions bounded on the north by the Presidio Golf Club. It was amazing that the cops hadn't already picked him up. "Johnny, just get the hell out of there. Now! Go out to Lake Street and wait for me at the first bus stop you see."

"Tommy—"

"Just do it!" Tommy pressed End. With luck he could get to Johnny in twenty minutes.

He walked back to the table, where Sally was signing the credit card slip.

"Sorry, just a few fires I need to put out. You know how it is."

Sally slid out from the banquette. "Of course;, I need to get back, too. We're done here anyway."

"Of course. Thanks for the lunch."

"Thank Hellebore & Crocell."

They walked out together. The valet brought her car around, and Tommy shook her hand one last time. As soon as she turned the corner, Tommy turned and bolted toward his own car, parked in a pay lot two blocks away.

Chapter 44

Tommy shot up Pine Street, making all the lights. He jumped over to California for the dodge through Laurel Heights. He cruised along Lake from Arguello Street to Park Presidio Drive, but Johnny was nowhere in sight. Tommy sighed and sped toward Pacific Terrace.

He passed under the great stone archway of the private gate and entered the loop. Pacific Terrace was like another dimension, an enclave of fifteen or so mansions with park-like lawns and gardens and ivy covered walls. Old, stately homes with Victorian and Edwardian flair, they looked as if they'd been airlifted straight from European estates. Pacific Terrace had been built by robber barons after their Nob Hill mansions were destroyed in the 1906 quake. The more ostentatious the house, the humbler the robber baron's origins.

Tommy didn't know which house was Claibourne's so he made a slow pass, cursing Johnny, positive he'd already been picked up.

Suddenly Johnny's head popped right into Tommy's open window.

"HEEEERE'S JOHNNY!"

"Son of a bitch!" Tommy braked hard. Fortunately, the house he stopped by was walled off. Unfortunately, right next door, an older gentleman with gloves and clippers was tending his rose bushes. He peered at them from under a tweed cap.

Tommy, smiling as disarmingly as he could, reached over and opened the passenger side door. "Come on, Johnny, get in."

Johnny stood up. "What are you talking about, man? We're here! This is the place! This is His house!"

Tommy lowered his voice. "Johnny, this isn't the time. Just get in, so we can get out of here. We can come back later, okay?"

The old man regarded them coolly, probably weighing whether or not to call the cops about this well-groomed guy in a business suit trying to hustle a homeless man into his car. Tommy smiled and waved again.

"Johnny, listen. Johnny! This is private property and we're both trespassing. We need to get out of here. Now please just get in the car."

“Tommy, look—”

“JUST GET IN THE CAR ALREADY.”

“May I help you?”

The voice sent a shock wave through Tommy. He turned around to see Charles Claibourne, in gray sweats and an SF Giants baseball cap, standing in front of his garage. Three days of stubble had smudged the edges of his usually putting-green perfect beard.

Johnny came around the car and dropped to his knees. “Master! Oh Master, please! Don’t send me away!”

Claibourne stepped back, his face tense in fear. He looked to Tommy for comprehension and found none. But Tommy detected a flash of recognition; Claibourne knew who he was. It had to be from the other night in the park, but that was impossible. Claibourne had been pepper-sprayed and beaten to the ground before getting a good look at Tommy. Tommy was sure of it.

The tweed neighbor called over. “Everything all right, Charles?”

In a flash, Claibourne resumed being Charles Claibourne. His back straightened and his face molded into a mask of neighborly congeniality. “Of course, Mr. Ogilvy. How are you today?”

Mr. Ogilvy took in Tommy and Johnny.

“Fine, Charles. Just fine.”

“And Mrs. Ogilvy? I trust she’s enjoying the fine weather.”

“Yes, she is. Thank you for asking.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must attend to my guests.”

Claibourne came around the car and gripped Tommy’s arm hard. “Get his ass up now and follow me, both of you. Now!” A whisper so harsh it left spray.

Tommy wiped his ear with his sleeve and nodded. Johnny came up with little prodding. They followed Claibourne through the front gate, across the front yard and around the side. Claibourne led them through a garden gate into the back yard, a space with classical columns and marble benches and sculpted shrubbery and rose bushes. Tommy wouldn’t have been surprised to see Socrates and Pythagoras hanging out, scratching circles and triangles in the ground.

“This way,” Claibourne said. He brought them through French doors into a garden room that looked like the lobby of a Mediterranean hotel. Terra cotta tile floor, whitewashed walls, rattan furniture with earth-tone fabrics. Tommy

noticed that the paintings on the walls were real; the brushstrokes cast shadows. Real artists, too. Miro, Chagall, Picasso.

One piece, a still life of a honeydew melon next to a pitcher of milk, looked very familiar, as if Tommy had seen it before in an art book or a calendar.

A nice enough room in which to sit down and talk, but no, Claibourne moved right through it. He led them down a small corridor and into a dark, windowless anteroom. After the brightness of the garden room, it was like entering a cave.

“Please sit down.” Claibourne gestured to a couple of heavy wooden chairs facing a massive wooden desk that was large enough for a small family to sleep on.

Tommy felt like they’d been sent to the principal’s office and the principal was the Grand Inquisitor.

Claibourne walked around to the other side and turned on a desk lamp, polished brass and green glass, but the brightness only intensified the surrounding darkness. He sat down in a large executive chair whose leather elegance contrasted with his baseball cap and sweats outfit. A cream-colored satin robe lay draped over the back of the chair, the same robe he’d been wearing that night in the park.

Claibourne leveled his gaze at Tommy. “Don’t get too comfortable. We’ll just wait for my neighbor to go inside, and then I expect you both to get in your car without fanfare and leave.”

“Sure.” Tommy wondered why he didn’t just call the cops. After all, Tommy and Johnny could be dangerous characters. Maybe his arrest had left him weary of cops. Then Tommy wondered why, of all the fantastic rooms this mansion must offer, he’d chosen to set up his office in this dark hole.

“I know you,” Claibourne said.

“Sure, we met the other night. In the park, remember?”

Claibourne shook his head. “Thomas Delacroix, formerly of *The Weekly Watch Dog*, right?”

Tommy shifted, sweat breaking out beneath the collar of his dress shirt. “As a matter of fact. . . But we’ve never met before. Not professionally.”

Claibourne looked amused. “Not ‘professionally,’ no. But you owe me for a dry-cleaning bill. Banana cream doesn’t agree with Armani.”

Tommy fought the urge to squirm. The pie-throwing incident had been years ago, and he was certain that no one had ever connected him with it. “I think you’re confusing me with someone else.”

“No, I don’t think so. We identified you from the security tapes. We know you helped Marcello Riis sneak in the pie. He was listed under a false name as your photographer.”

“I had nothing—”

“Do you think we’re stupid?” Claibourne leaned forward and stared into Tommy’s eyes. “Do you think I’m stupid?”

Tommy swallowed. Had Claibourne brought him inside to exact revenge? Nothing was keeping Tommy from leaving. Except maybe Johnny.

“I know you very well, Mr. Delacroix.”

“Really.”

“Oh, yes. One tends to take an interest in the man who smears your suit with pie and later calls your family, and I quote, ‘a multigenerational blight on San Francisco history.’” Claibourne shrugged. “Maybe you remember writing that in *The Dog*? ”

Tommy swallowed hard.

“I love guys like you, Mr. Delacroix. You come here from your little East Coast burgs and Midwest cow towns, chasing some hippie California dream, and immediately presume to tell us how to run our city.”

“Oh, so it’s your city?”

Claibourne leaned forward and thumped the desk with his fist. “Yes, yes it is. Do you know why Alamo Square is Alamo Square? Do you know why Haight Street is named Haight Street?”

“Uh, because—”

“Because we said so. My great-great-grandfather and his associates pointed at a map and said so. When they showed up, this town was half-saloon and half-whorehouse. Shanties passed for hotels and the streets were mud and manure. In less than a generation, they turned that mess into a shining jewel, and it’s our charge to keep it that way. We’ve made San Francisco one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Do you know why there’s a new downtown stadium?”

“Because you said so?”

“Yes, Mr. Delacroix. Because we said so.”

“And the rest of us are what, tourists?”

“Aren’t you? Where do you think you’ll be in five years, Mr. Delacroix? Hmm? You’re getting older, you want to settle down and raise a family, but who are you kidding? You can’t afford to buy anything halfway decent in San Francisco, can you?”

“You don’t know me.”

“Face it. You’re going to wind up out in some post-war tract house in Concord or Hayward, and out of our collective hair. You couldn’t even afford Petaluma, not on what they’re paying you down in Redwood Shores.”

Tommy sat up, alarmed.

“Relax, Mr. Delacroix. What? You think I didn’t know about your new job? No one was more surprised than I to learn that you were working at TransData of all places. Quite a career shift, wasn’t it?”

Tommy was amazed that he had pissed off Claibourne enough for the man to keep track of his whereabouts. He didn’t know whether to be proud or very, very afraid.

“Your neighbor has probably gone inside by now. We should be going.”

“I wonder what Eli Larsen would think about your extracurricular activities. Running around with bums and harassing upstanding citizens. I mean, here it is Tuesday afternoon, the middle of the working day, yet you are not at the office, are you? In fact, you look like you just came from a job interview, possibly with a competitor. Am I right?”

Tommy leaned forward. “Look here, Claibourne—”

“Did I mention that Mr. Larsen and I are well acquainted? Maybe I should give him a call.” Claibourne winked. “You know, just to catch up.”

Who was he kidding? “Yeah, you should do that, Claibourne. You should call him right now. Oh wait, you can’t, because Eli Larsen doesn’t take calls from lunatics that spend their nights cavorting barefoot in the park and laying hands on the homeless.” Tommy smiled. “Am I right?”

“You don’t know anything about that.”

“Oh, but I do! I was there when you came out of your schizoid trance, remember? You were wearing that robe!” Tommy pointed at the garment draped over Claibourne’s chair.

“I think you’re confused about what you saw.” Claibourne’s expression softened. “It’s true that I do suffer from a rare form of somnambulism and have, as a result, found myself in some unfortunate situations. Embarrassing, perhaps, but ultimately inconsequential. As for this. . .” He balled up the robe and pitched it into the trash bin next to Johnny.

At the same time, a small green and white capsule clattered into the pool of light beneath the desk lamp. Claibourne plucked it away, but not before Tommy got a good look.

Tommy had seen pills like that before, once in particular back in high school, in the palm of Jimmy Krug’s hand. They were waiting for their ride to an Allman Brothers concert and Jimmy recommended that Tommy ingest the capsule. Tommy did so and felt quite energized throughout the show, dancing on his seat and racing down to the floor for the encores. In fact, he felt energized through the night and into the next afternoon. No amount of marijuana dulled the speed’s edge, and Tommy never again blindly accepted any drug from anyone without knowing exactly what it was.

This explained Claibourne’s jittery movements and the dark circles under his eyes. Speed was an effective, if untenable, prevention against sleepwalking.

Claibourne smiled at Tommy like a reptile. “Come now, Mr. Delacroix. You claim to be a journalist. Don’t tell me you believe in all this miracle nonsense? Don’t you find it interesting that all these news stories focus on the scandalous, on the salacious?”

What news stories? Tommy nodded anyway. He’d check the papers later.

“Ooh, look who was found wandering in the park! Ooh, look, he’s crazy! He thinks he can heal people!” Claibourne shook his head, sneering. “A truly intelligent journalist would look at the facts and wonder who might profit from such a smear campaign.”

“Like who?”

“Excuse me?”

“I imagine you’ve made one or two enemies over the years. Who do you think might be behind such a thing?”

Claibourne smiled. “It’s no secret that I’ve been involved in the mayor’s stealth campaign for the Senate, so my first guess would be someone from the opposition.”

Tommy nodded. It made sense. Embarrass Claibourne and you embarrass the mayor by association. Taint the whole campaign before it even hits the ground. Set the fund-raising effort back to zero.

“So Mr. Delacroix, it’s Occam’s Razor.” Claibourne held up his palms like a scale. “Which explanation is the simplest? Faith-healing socialite or a politically motivated smear campaign?”

Johnny jumped to his feet. “But you healed me, Master!”

Fear flashed through Claibourne’s face. “Please sit down.”

“You gave me back my eyesight!”

“Mr. Delacroix, would you please—”

“You turned my water into wine!”

Tommy put his hand on Johnny’s arm. “Johnny, come on.”

Johnny spun on him. “Are you gonna just sit there, Tommy? Aren’t you gonna say anything? You know the truth. You know. Are you gonna just sit there like I’m some crazy person?”

Tommy shrugged. “It’s true. Until a few days ago, Johnny here was blind, had been for twenty-odd years.”

Claibourne snorted.

“I checked his medical records. Irreparably blind.”

Claibourne shook his head. “And you witnessed this miracle personally?”

“No, but—”

He put up his hand. “So, of course it must have been me.”

“There are others, though. Other miracles and other witnesses.” Tommy cleared his throat. “In fact, someone has documented over one hundred incidents going back eight years. Someone reliable. A cop.”

Claibourne tightened, perhaps flashing back to all those rides home with Guardino. “Listen to what you are saying. Do you really imagine this is possible? Come on, Delacroix, I thought you were a journalist. Maybe this explains the standards at *The Weekly Watch Dog*.”

Tommy ignored the dig. He was about to tell him that, no, he didn’t think it was possible for anyone to make the lame walk and the blind see, let alone an outright evil bastard like him. But a weird compassion for Claibourne—Claibourne!—came over him. The man was so pitiful, hunkered down in his

basement room because people thought he was either a nut job or a miracle worker. Hiding in the shadows and popping speed because he was terrified of falling asleep.

The poor son of a bitch.

There was a loud knock. Claibourne glanced at Tommy then Johnny, checking their reactions. Johnny sat back down. "Yes, come in, Ms. Flannigan."

A door behind him opened and light flooded in from behind a large African-American woman. She leaned in, clutching a cordless phone to her chest as she took in the scene.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Claibourne?"

"Yes, everything is all right. What is it?"

"It's Ms. Sandoval again, sir. She really is quite insistent. Something about a meeting with Stoneflag?"

Tommy's antennae shot up.

Claibourne sighed. "Very well." He took the handset from Ms. Flannigan and spun away from Tommy and Johnny in his chair. "Ms. Sandoval? Good afternoon . . ."

As Claibourne murmured into the phone, Tommy got a better look at the room. At first glance, he thought it was less an office than a cluttered storeroom, with file boxes stacked on every available surface. In the corner, some boxes sat at a weird angle. Squinting, he was realized they were piled on top of a pinball machine, the sides of which were yellow with curving red stripes. To one side were several bar stools and a bar, all stacked high with boxes.

Suddenly the room was all too familiar. The prefab wood paneling, the neon beer signs, mirrors overlaid with vintage whiskey logos. Just the sort of basement rec room in which Tommy had spent most of his adolescence, shooting pool and drinking clandestine beer.

Thinking about pool, he looked up and saw an oblong box suspended over the desk, a stained-glass light fixture suspended in the shadows. He saw the empty pool cue rack on the wall and the truth hit him like a cosmic Duh!

Claibourne's desk was a pool table, the felt surface encased beneath a slab of polished wood. For confirmation, he crept his fingers along the bottom edge until he found the leather mesh of the side pocket. It was empty.

Tommy reached over and tapped Johnny on the knee. He pointed to the light fixture but Johnny ignored him. Johnny acted funny, like he was trying not to react. He kept one hand under his coat, which bulged slightly.

Shit. He'd swiped something. Tommy glanced at Ms. Flannigan. She and Claibourne both had their backs turned. Tommy tapped Johnny's knee with greater urgency.

Johnny just kept looking straight ahead.

Claibourne hung up with a beep. He spun back around. "Gentlemen, as much as I've enjoyed our time together, I must invite you to leave."

Tommy stayed put. "What's up with Stoneflag? Must be pretty important."

Claibourne smiled, brimming smugness. "Just a minor rescheduling, Mr. Delacroix. Contrary to your uninformed assumptions, some people still want to talk to me, the Great Pariah. Imagine that!" He gestured toward the door. "Now, if you don't mind. . ."

"Of course." Tommy stood and Johnny followed his lead.

"Ms. Flannigan, would you be so kind as to show our visitors out? Through the back."

"Of course, sir."

At the door, Tommy paused. "One last question, if I may. Do you shoot pool?"

Claibourne's face scrunched in confusion, then softened. "As a child, I did play some billiards. At Stanford, I was sort of the unofficial campus champion." His look hardened again. "But that was a long time ago. When I became a man, as the saying goes, I put away childish things. I suggest you do the same. Goodbye, Mr. Delacroix."

Back outside, there was no sign of Mr. Ogilvy. Tommy herded Johnny into his car and didn't breathe again until they'd passed beneath the stone archway and back into plebeian San Francisco.

Johnny laughed. "Hoo boy, Tommy, He sure nailed you! You should've seen your face when He talked about your boss."

"Forget all that. What did you steal?"

"I beg your pardon! In all my years on the street I have never once stolen anything. Never once!" Johnny crossed his arms and looked out the window.

"So what did you stick under your coat?"

Johnny whipped out a shiny white bundle. "You mean, this?"
Claibourne's robe.

"Jesus H. Christ, Johnny. What the fuck?"

"He threw it in the garbage, you saw Him. So you can't say I stole it."

"Let's hope he sees it that way."

"Here," Johnny held the robe up like a merchant of old presenting a bolt of cloth.
"It's really smooth and soft."

"No, I don't think so."

"Come on, don't be a pussy. Why not?"

Why not, indeed? The robe wasn't going to engulf him like the Blob. And yet as Tommy reached toward the robe, his fingers hesitated, half-expecting an electric shock. Something. But the material was simple satin, smooth and cool to the touch. No different than one of Carlotta's night gowns. Maybe a little heavier.

Chapter 45

Tommy dropped Johnny off at the park entrance at the top of Haight Street, warning him to stay away from Claibourne, no matter what. Tommy just wanted to head home and lie down for a bit before dinner with Carlotta's parents. He had a couple of hours.

But on impulse, he pulled a quick left, then a quick right, and found himself cruising through Cole Valley, his old neighborhood. He told himself that this was just the scenic route home, but when he saw a parking spot in front of the Postal Chase, he pulled in.

He got out and stretched and tossed his suit coat into the backseat. Finnegan's Wake Pub was just a few doors down, and he thought a pint of ale might be in order. A chance to sit and process the events of the day.

The bright sun pinched his eyes, as if he'd just come out of a movie. Tommy blinked and, with each blink, Cole Valley appeared increasingly foreign. He recognized every building and tree, but somehow they didn't add up to his old neighborhood. A weak nausea soured his gut.

Maybe it was the Chicken Caesar. Or the back-to-back encounters with Sally and then Claibourne. Tommy felt oddly tall, like he was walking on stilts and might fall over any second.

Stroller-pushing mothers and kids on bikes swirled around him, probably heading for the playground on Grattan. Across the street, a clerk from Alpha Market was taking delivery from a double-parked truck, crates of produce stacked on the tailgate.

Tommy thought the clerk might be Fayad, whom he'd gotten to know over the years, but it wasn't.

No one looked the least bit familiar. Not the store clerks, nor any of the young mothers, nor anyone anywhere. They had been replaced by a fresh crop. And so, Tommy supposed, had he. No doubt somewhere down the street, a young writer was scrambling to make ends meet and trying to have as much fun as possible along the way.

Same stage, same roles. Different actors.

Tommy found himself standing on the corner; he'd walked right past Finnegan's Wake. The way he was feeling, though, maybe a beer wasn't the best idea. The Tassajara Café sat cater-corner from where he stood.

Of course. Tassajara was where he was supposed to go.

He didn't understand the feeling. The café was the honey and he was the fly.

The place was half full. Mostly students from UCMED with their laptops and fat textbooks. No one he knew. The barista was a stranger, too. Once upon a time, Tommy couldn't get to the counter without having to stop and say hello to five or six people.

"May I help you?"

"Can I get a vanilla decaf soy latte?"

"No problem."

"Does Mike still work here?"

"Who?"

"No one. Never mind."

Tommy grabbed a table and sipped his latte, foamy and sweet with a bite of nutmeg. Soothing, but he still felt out of sorts. What had happened at Claibourne's house? Had he really accepted a job with Hellebore & Crocell? The memories were hazy, scrambled like scenes from a half-forgotten dream.

Things were moving too quickly. Beyond his control.

His cell phone chimed. Carlotta. He'd forgotten to call her after the big lunch.

"Hey, sweetie."

"Tommy? Are you still at lunch? What's going on?"

"No, it's done."

"So? How did it go? The suspense is killing me!"

"I guess it went pretty well." Tommy's throat thickened. "They're overnighting a formal offer letter."

"Oh, Tommy! That's wonderful!"

"Yes and the money's pretty good, too." He tried to explain the graduated salary system, but kept getting it wrong. "Suffice it to say that it's more money."

Carlotta whistled. "A lot more. I guess maybe we'll be able to get a place sooner than we'd expected."

“I did have to take out a second mortgage on my soul, but—”

Carlotta chuckled. “I’m sure you did, sweetie. I’m sure you did. Where are you now?”

“Tassajara Café.”

“What are you doing there?”

“Johnny called me right as lunch was ending. I had to pull him out of a bind. Check it out.” Tommy gave her the Cliff’s Notes version of his descent into Casa Claibourne.

Carlotta was shocked about the robe. “What was Johnny thinking?”

“I don’t know. Let’s just hope he knows better than to go back.”

They ended the call, deciding to leave their place by five to meet Carlotta’s folks on Union Street. As expected, her stepfather Burt wanted to eat at Perry’s. Again.

Talking to Carlotta had shaken Tommy out of his daze. What was he doing in Cole Valley? He resolved to slurp down his latte and head home.

But then Carrie plopped down into the chair opposite him.

“Howdy there, stranger.” She set down a cup of tea and scone on a white plate.

“Carrie. Oh. Hey.”

“What brings you to Cole Valley, Mr. I-Never-Answer-My-Phone?” Her expression brightened. “Shouldn’t you be at work, helping the Over Class concentrate wealth and advancing economic imperialism?”

“That’s Wednesdays and Fridays. Tuesdays, I auction off my soul.”

“Really? Any takers?”

“Surprisingly, yes. Considering the condition it’s in.”

Carrie broke off a chunk of scone. “That’s funny. I had the impression you’d already sold it.”

“Ouch. Speaking of soul-selling, any word from CNN yet?”

“Touché, Monsieur Delacroix. Touché.” She stuck out her tongue and popped the chunk of scone into her mouth.

“Speaking of being at work, shouldn’t you be at *The Dog*, getting ready for press?” Tuesday was production day, when that week’s issue was finalized and sent to the printers that same night.

“They shifted production to Arizona. Outsourcing, they call it.” Carrie’s lower lip hung low and quivered. “Isn’t that such a pretty word? Outsourcing? Sounds like something you do with a kayak. I guess outsourcing is the reason they laid off most of the staff this morning. Including me.”

Tommy’s stomach dropped. “What?”

“Ten years I was at that place, and now I’m what? De-sourced?” She looked away from Tommy. “You were right to jump ship when you did. Smart.”

“So is that it? What about severance?”

Carrie stared at her plate. “Two weeks. Plus the payout for my unused vacation time. It’s like a month’s paid vacation.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

Carrie pressed down on the crumbs on her plate, flattening them one by one into tiny pancakes.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Look for another job, duh.”

“You’re a good editor, and content is king these days. All these Web startups need people with your skills.”

“I’m tired of print, and that includes the Web. I want to get into broadcast.”

Tommy nodded. “All kidding aside, is CNN really an option?”

“Maybe KRON first.” KRON was a local news station. Carrie pounded a gentle fist against the table. “Gosh, if only I had some big story to break for them. If only someone I knew had the inside dope on a really big international scandal involving a major Silicon Valley player.” She sighed dramatically.

And Tommy understood. In a flash, all was clear. Carrie was the reason he’d been directed to Tassajara. So he could direct her to the scan of the email. To take that weight from him, and maybe redeem himself, just a little bit, for the Hellebore & Crocell deal.

“I see. Well, maybe somebody does know something but is afraid that it might get traced back to them and jeopardize their career.”

Carrie’s jaw dropped. “And rightly so. Of course, as a professional journalist I would do anything he, or she, asked.”

“They might need more than assurances. They’d need to set up some secret system in which there was no paper trail leading right back to them.”

“Of course.”

Tommy slid out of his seat and stood. He brushed non-existent crumbs from his shirt. “Too bad neither of us knows anyone like that. Too bad there’s no juicy secret about TDM.”

Carrie’s mouth puckered.

Tommy went on, “But since you’re free, there is this project you could help me with. I’ve been working on this important white paper, and I could sure use an extra pair of eyes on it. If you could proofread it and make some editorial suggestions, I could pay you a few bucks. Whatever the standard rate is, of course.”

Carrie’s eyes widened. “Sure, I’d be happy to take a look at it.”

“Great, and since you’re not at *The Dog* anymore, you’ll probably need to use an anonymous computer at the library to download an electronic copy of it.”

“You mean, it’s online?”

“Yep, right on the Web site where anyone can download it. Nothing hugely confidential. High level conceptual stuff. You’ll probably have to fill out some online form, contact information; you know how marketing works, but you could just make something up. It’s not like you’re an actual sales prospect. Just go to the home page, click on Solutions, and there should be a link to white papers somewhere. It’s called ‘The Role of Database Applications in Business Processes.’ Something like that.”

“Okay. ‘The Role of Database Applications in Business Processes.’ Got it.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate any help you can give me. Oh, and don’t worry about any of the diagrams. The one on page 14 is really complex and confusing. In particular.”

“I see.”

“It’s a multi-layered graphic, and there’s no telling how many elements are layered and grouped and regrouped. Very complex and deep, but very informative at the same time.” Tommy stopped. Carrie had to understand what he was getting at.

The engineer had composed that specific diagram from dozens of graphical elements—shapes, arrows, labels, glyphs representing system components—some of which were comprised of even smaller elements. A real mess, but a mess into which Tommy could easily insert one more element: the scan, scaled way down and embedded into the background, grouped within a group within a

group. Before deleting the original image from the Zip disk, he deconstructed the diagram to confirm that the scan could be restored to its original size and resolution.

Carrie nodded. "Okay, well, I'll just ignore that particular diagram then."

"Good plan. Well, I have to get going. Think you can handle that?"

"I think so." Carrie jumped out of her seat and pulled Tommy into a bear hug.
"Thank you thank you thank you."

"Please try to comport yourself in a more professional manner."

"Thanks for the advice, Mr. *What Color Is Your Parachute?*" She caressed his cheek and brushed back the hair over his ear. "You're a good man, Tommy Delacroix."

"I just remembered. I still have all those comps from the Magic Drawer."

"Keep 'em. We emptied out the drawer before the layoff anyway, divvied them up. Bryce never mentioned them to the new owners, and I don't think they want to know. No column for that sort of thing on their spreadsheets."

"I guess I'm out a hundred bucks, right?"

Carrie shrugged. "Sorry! Why not take that slut Carlotta up to a hot springs for a weekend? Take her on a hot-air balloon ride with complimentary champagne."

"I'll do that."

They hugged one more time, and Tommy walked out into the sunny afternoon.

Across the street, Fayad was leaning against the wall outside Alpha Market, smoking. His face brightened as Tommy approached.

"Hey man, long time no see! Where've you been?"

"I've been wondering that myself, Fayad. I've been wondering that myself."

It was done.

Chapter 46

Marta didn't know how many people to expect for the Stoneflag presentation, so she set a packet in front of all ten seats at the conference table in Mr. Claibourne's office. She connected the laptop to the digital projector and watched as the firm's logo appeared and brightened on the pull-down screen.

She checked her watch and moved around the table, straightening the packets like paintings in a gallery. She wanted to be at the hospital. She wanted to be with her sister when they brought Lazlo to her room. Mr. Claibourne promised she could leave at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr. Claibourne came in, dressed in the same tan suit and blue shirt she'd picked out for him last Friday. He was wearing sunglasses, too. His movements were staggered and jumpy, even when he was standing still. "Okay, okay. How are we looking, Ms. Sandoval?"

"Everything's ready, sir."

He studied the table, glanced at the logo on the screen, and nodded. "Coffee, soda, all that?"

Marta gestured to the credenza, where hot beverage dispensers waited next to the stainless steel buckets with soda and bottled water on ice.

Mr. Claibourne nodded. "Good, good."

"Sir, are you all right?"

He chuckled. "A little sleep-deprived but I'll manage. I took a couple of Valium before I left the house." He held his hand flat out, fingers splayed. "See? Steady as a rock."

"Yes, sir."

For a moment, they both stood there, saying nothing.

"Sir, I—"

"Don't worry, Ms. Sandoval. I doubt we'll go over an hour." He scanned the room again. "You're sure we're ready to go?"

"Yes, sir, and thank you. I—"

“I don’t have to tell you how important this meeting is.” Mr. Claibourne checked his watch. “Well, we still have a few minutes. I’m going to freshen up.” He disappeared into his private bathroom.

Marta wandered over to the windows and watched the traffic on Montgomery Street. The narrow lanes, dark as metal in the shadows, were packed tight with cars. People were already heading home. She hugged herself and repeated in her mind: Lazlo, Lazlo.

Reception called. The Stoneflag contingent had arrived.

“Great, bring them in. How many are there?”

The receptionist chuckled. “Five, if you count the dog.”

“Excuse me?”

“They brought a dog.”

Marta hung up as Mr. Claibourne came out. He’d removed his sunglasses; dark circles shadowed his eyes.

“Are they here?”

“Yes, sir. You should know—” But before she could mention the dog, he went out the double doors to greet their visitors.

A moment later, the Stoneflag group, five of them, came into the outer office, guided by one of the receptionists. Bradley Washburn, tall and stout and silver-haired, stepped forward and clasped Mr. Claibourne’s hand and shoulder.

“Charles! It’s good to see you.”

“You, too, Bradley.” Mr. Claibourne’s eyes shifted to the dog as it was wheeled in on a cushioned platform like a visiting wazir. The Weimaraner’s gray coat was patchy and bald in spots. Though lying down, his muscles rippled with palsied tremors. The intertwined smells of medicated salve and disinfectant tickled Marta’s nose.

Mr. Claibourne glanced at Marta, seeking insight. She could only shrug.

Marta led the group into Mr. Claibourne’s inner office. She gestured toward the credenza. “Would anyone care for a refreshment? Coffee? Bottled water?”

No one responded.

“Well,” Mr. Claibourne said. “Let’s get started. We’ve outlined a strategy that can effectively leverage the very obstacles facing the project. We can turn the presence of the shell mound to our advantage.” Still nothing. He gestured to the

conference table. “If you’d please be seated, we’ve prepared a detailed presentation.”

Washburn made a face and exchanged confused glances with his team. Marta grew afraid for her boss, and herself. She felt dizzy and placed one hand on Mr. Claibourne’s desk to steady herself.

“I’m sorry, Charles. I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

Mr. Claibourne smiled but his lips fidgeted. “A misunderstanding? We’ve prepared a presentation, we have a strategy.”

“Charles, with all due respect, that’s out of the question. You of all people should understand that we can no longer have you associated with this project.”

Mr. Claibourne blinked. “But what about. . . How are you going to handle the shell mound? I mean, we have a wonderful strategy all planned out.” He sank down into one of the chairs. Marta could barely keep from going to him.

Washburn shook his head. “Don’t worry. That’s none of your concern. We’ve found someone good to help us.” He looked to his assistant, a bespectacled young woman with freckles and chestnut hair. “What’s that fellow’s name again, Melanie?”

“Harlan Briggs, sir.”

“That’s him. Fellow out of Sacramento. Best to have an outsider on this, don’t you agree, Charles? Plus, he’s got some pull with the Native American Heritage Society.”

“Native American Heritage Association, sir,” Melanie corrected. “The NAHA.”

“That’s it. We’ll even have that television Indian, Chief Mark Something, as a spokesman for us.” Washburn winked. “Not too bad, eh, Charles? An actual ‘Native American’ on our side? Very clever fellow, this Briggs.”

“Yes.” Mr. Claibourne swallowed hard. “Very clever.”

Marta walked over to the credenza, poured a glass of water, and brought it over to Mr. Claibourne. He nodded and took a small sip.

“Why are you here, Bradley?”

Washburn’s brow tensed and wrinkled up. He glanced at his team. As if on cue, they filed out of the inner office, pulling the double doors shut behind them. The dog looked around confused, like a sea lion expecting a treat, until his eyes settled on his master.

“Could we be alone for a moment, Charles?”

Marta understood that he expected her to leave as well.

Mr. Claibourne didn't move. "She stays."

"Charles—"

"She stays. State your business, Bradley."

Washburn hesitated but took the chair next to Mr. Claibourne. "Now, Charles, I'm not so naive that I believe everything I read in the papers is true. I'm not a fool. But . . ."

Washburn brought his hands together into one great fist and lowered his head. When he looked up, his face was shiny with tears. Marta instinctively got the tissue box from the credenza and slid it across the table.

He ignored the gesture. "If there is any truth, any truth at all to what I've read about you . . . Even the merest kernel . . ."

Mr. Claibourne's mouth sagged open, his jaw working slowly as if he were trying to speak or pop his ears.

"Please, don't make me beg." Washburn pulled a tissue free and dabbed at his eyes.

"Bradley, I assure you that I . . . What exactly are you asking me to do?"

Washburn extended one arm toward the trembling Weimaraner. "If there is anything you can do for McDougal here, anything, I implore you, please." Fresh sobs choked out his words.

Mr. Claibourne rubbed his eyes. Marta had never seen him look so tired. He looked like he was covered with dust.

"You want me to heal your dog?"

All the tension left the other man's body and he fell forward, half-landing in Mr. Claibourne's lap. "Oh, thank you, Charles, thank you! God bless you!"

Mr. Claibourne shook his head. He laid a comforting hand on Washburn's shoulder. "Bradley, I can't heal your dog."

Washburn jerked upright. "But you said . . . I don't understand . . . Please!"

"You'd better leave now. I'm sorry." Mr. Claibourne pushed his chair back. He stood and walked over to the windows. "Ms. Sandoval, please."

Marta opened the double doors. The rest of the Stoneflag contingent stood right outside, as if eavesdropping.

“We’re finished now.” She stepped out of the way, indicating that they could come in and collect Washburn and his dog.

Washburn didn’t move until Melanie helped him to his feet and led him outside.

After a moment, when the room was calm and settled, Mr. Claibourne sank into his desk chair and leaned back into the ficus leaves. He looked small and rumpled. He closed his eyes and let out a great sigh.

“Mr. Claibourne, I’m sorry. This is my fault. I should have confirmed.”

He shook his head. “You should go, too, Marta. You should go to your sister.”

Marta started collecting the packets from the table. “Let me just get this all cleared away.” As much as she wanted to leave, she hated to see him so defeated. She wished she could reach out to him, tell him that everything would be all right.

“No. Go. Please. I need some time alone. And you need to be with your sister.”

Marta said nothing. She looked around the office, at the classic blonde wood paneling, the framed watercolors of San Francisco, the sofa and chairs arranged in the sitting area like a hotel lounge. She closed her eyes and could almost hear Mr. Claibourne Senior sinking into the creaking leather, a cut crystal tumbler of scotch sparkling in his hand.

That was quite a spectacle, wasn’t it, Ms. Sandoval?

That was the day Hector barged into the office, demanding his pound of flesh, the day Mr. Claibourne had sat him down and explained How Things Are and why Hector had better get used to the idea.

The last day she ever saw or heard from Hector. He signed whatever papers they put in front of him, and never bothered her again.

She flashed forward to the day Mr. Claibourne Junior installed the ficus. *Does this tree look centered okay to you? Yes, it does, sir.* All the times she picked out his suits for him. The poor boy had no sense of color coordination. *Wear the blue shirt, sir.*

Marta opened her eyes, saw the dust suspended in the sunbeams streaming through the Bush Street windows. So many years of her life spent in these two rooms.

All at once, Marta realized she was saying good-bye.

“Yes, Mr. Claibourne.” She cleared her throat. “If there’s nothing else, then—”

“There’s nothing else, Marta. Good night.”

“Good night, sir.”

Chapter 47

The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors opened with a *bing*. Nurse Steve pushed the O2 cart out of the elevator. Two hard lefts brought him into Ward C. As he approached the nurse station, Simon Murphy stepped into his path, arms crossed.

“Well, well, well. I don’t believe it.” Simon’s face was a mask of put-on stupefaction. “As I live and breathe, here’s Mr. Steve Nogueira himself working a double shift.”

“I don’t want to hear it, Simon.”

“No, please, please, someone tell me!” Simon looked around dramatically. “Has hell frozen over? Are pigs winging their way over our fair city? Could it be Kingdom Come at last?”

“Fuck off.”

“No, please, I have to know what happened. Wasn’t it just yesterday that you declared to everyone, ‘No more double shifts for me, thank you! You lads go right ahead, but not me. No, sir. Never again!'” Simon leaned back against the counter. “So please tell me, Steven. What dire circumstances have driven you to such desperate measures?”

Steve struggled to ignore him. “Can we get on with it, please? They’re sending down a patient from ICU and I’m supposed to set up the O2.”

Simon glanced at a clipboard lying flat next to him. “Room 317, is it?”

“You know what fucking room it is.”

“Seems there’s been a slight delay with the present occupant. Still waiting on the morgue boys and the cleanup crew.” Simon smiled. “So what was it? Horse didn’t come in at the track? Stock portfolio not performing as expected?”

“Actually, Simon, I’m saving up for another date with your sister. Five more minutes of overtime ought to cover it.”

Simon reddened and his hands tightened into fists. Steve was ready for it, praying for it. Time to have this out, once and for all.

“What’s going on here, gentlemen?”

Simon and Steve snapped to attention at the sound of Ms. Walker's voice. Neither had noticed the assistant administrator approaching.

"Need I remind you again of policy regarding personal conversations in the public areas?" She crossed her fat arms over her blue blazer.

"No, ma'am."

"Sorry, Ms. Walker."

She melted them both with a reprimanding glare. "What brings you to this ward, Mr. Nogueira?"

Steve cleared his throat. "I was sent up to prep the O2 for an ICU transfer, Ms. Walker. The room crew isn't here yet, but they should be along any minute now."

"That's fine. There's been a minor change. We need to delay for a few minutes. The current occupant is deceased and we're waiting for the next of kin to view the body."

"Yes, ma'am, but Ms. Baltmeier told me to—"

Ms. Walker cut him off. "Ms. Baltmeier has been informed." Her mouth twitched. "In case you're wondering about the special treatment, the deceased was a very important man and his family has been very generous with the hospital in the past. It's the least we can do to extend a little courtesy."

Steve stayed quiet, knowing Simon couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"If you don't mind my asking, Ms. Walker, who was the gentleman?"

She looked annoyed. "I do mind, but I see no harm. His name was Charles Claibourne, and his family's history in San Francisco dates back to the Gold Rush." Ms. Walker turned to stare at Steve. "Are you all right, Mr. Nogueira?"

"What? Of course I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be all right?"

The way she looked at him, Steve felt she could read his mind.

"Anyway," she continued. "Dr. Hofstetter is with Mr. Claibourne's son right now, so it shouldn't be much longer. Just allow him a few minutes alone with the deceased. Just a few minutes, then hustle him out of there."

A quiet *bing* sounded from the elevators.

Dr. Hofstetter, the senior administrator, came around the corner with a man in his thirties. The son wore a nice tan suit with a blue shirt, all very expensive

looking. But the tie had been pulled loose and he looked exhausted, his eyes set back in dark circles, his bearded cheeks hollow like a man half-starved.

Hofstetter heeled like a dog, speaking softly as the other man nodded and looked in every direction but Hofstetter's. His jaw tensed and shifted as if he were grinding his teeth.

Patient Alpha. Steve had a floating feeling, half lightness, half nausea. That the man whose file he had stolen would walk into the same ward. . .

"Nurse!" Hofstetter barked, knocking Steve out of his trance.

Steve glanced at Ms. Walker, who signaled him with a curt nod. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Please take Mr. Claibourne to see his father."

"Of course." Steve felt awkward, clumsy, made of marshmallow. He stepped alongside Claibourne and pointed the way. "This way, sir. It's right over here."

Claibourne followed in silence, Steve trying to act normal. And why not? It's not like Claibourne could have any idea. . .

"Is there a problem, Nurse?" Claibourne looked at him sideways.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Nothing."

"Here we are." Steve stepped ahead and pushed the door open for Claibourne.

Claibourne paused outside the threshold and adjusted his cuffs, like an actor waiting for his cue. Steve heard him take a deep breath and exhale forcefully. Then he walked past Steve and into the room.

Steve followed. The corpse had been dressed in elegant sky-blue pajamas and neatly tucked into the bed like a child. He appeared shrunken but Steve could tell that he'd been a large man. The discoloration was setting in quickly; the morgue boys had better hurry.

"Do you mind?" Claibourne glared at Steve.

"Sir?"

"May I have a few minutes? You know, alone?"

Steve said nothing and withdrew, intentionally leaving the door ajar. He looked down the corridor at Ms. Walker and made a show of checking his watch.

He heard the distant *bing* of the elevator and the morgue boys came around the corner, wheeling an empty gurney. Ms. Walker intercepted them; Steve could see

them protesting as she explained.

After a few minutes, Ms. Walker waved at him and tapped her watch. She made a rolling, move-it-along motion with her hands. Steve nodded and turned toward the door. It was his turn to take a deep breath.

He cracked the door to peek inside; what he saw was not what he expected.

Claibourne had taken off his coat and tie, and now stood by the bed, one hand on his dead father's belly, the other on his forehead. His eyes were pinched shut in concentration and he was muttering to himself.

"I can do this, I can do this. Shit. Okay. Concentrate. Everybody says I can do this, so come on. Focus, Charlie, focus. Okay, come on, you old piece of shit. Live. Live. Live! Come on! Goddammit. You have to live. You have to. Come on. I know I can do this. I know I can do this. I know I can."

Steve stepped back, allowing the door to close gently. He looked back down the hall. Ms. Walker made a face and held up her hands in impatience.

Steve took another deep breath and rapped his knuckles against the door. "Sir?"

He pushed the door open. Claibourne was now folded over his father's body, sobbing and shaking, but making no sound at all.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's time. We need to take him away now."

Without getting up, Claibourne nodded. He lifted his head slowly, face streaked with tears. "Yes, of course. Excuse me."

"It's all right, sir."

Steve leaned into the hallway and signaled to the morgue boys. When he turned back around, Claibourne had slumped into the visitor's chair in the corner, head in hands.

"Um, sir?"

The morgue boys stood in the doorway. They exchanged glances with Steve and shrugged.

"Sir? Mr. Claibourne?" When the man didn't respond, Steve put one hand on his shoulder and rocked him gently. Claibourne's head rolled backward and he snorted out a two-part snore.

The morgue boys laughed and rolled into the room, adjusting the gurney to the same height as the bed. With a-one and a-two, they swooshes the body onto the gurney. They zipped the bag closed and fixed the last strap.

“Okay,” the taller one said. “Let’s send this one home.”

Chapter 48

After the morgue boys left, Steve let Claibourne sleep so he could focus on making room for the O2 cart. He tried to roll the bedside table out of the way, but it was stuck on something. Steve knelt down and saw that the caster was blocked by a fallen magazine.

Of course, he thought. It can't just roll away like it's supposed to. I have to get down on the frigging floor. The magazine put up a fight, pinched as it was by the caster. Steve nudged the table with his shoulder and ripped the obstruction free.

He heard a noise and looked up. The door was just closing. The chair was empty. Claibourne was gone. But his coat and tie remained, draped against the back of the chair, as if the man had bodily disappeared, leaving only his clothes behind. Steve started after him, but as he came around the bed, he froze.

Claibourne's shoes and socks were on the floor.

Campus pool shark Charlie Claibourne was found wandering barefoot. . . Patient Alpha also insisted on removing his socks and shoes as soon as he entered the somnambulant state.

Steve opened the door and peered down the corridor. The ward, usually busy, was deserted and quiet. There was no sign of Simon or Mrs. Walker or Hofstetter. Steve walked past the vacated nurse station and into the main hall, also devoid of people. As Steve came around to the elevators, Claibourne jumped out in front of him.

“Boo!”

Steve jumped. At first, he thought it was someone else. This couldn't be Claibourne. Gone were the twitchy movements and the dark circles under the eyes. Gone were the sour patrician attitude and impatience. This man looked much younger and healthier, his skin bright, almost glowing.

But Claibourne it was. Barefoot, the untucked tails of his blue dress shirt flowing over his suit pants.

Steve glanced down both sides of the corridor. No sign of anyone.

“You're Charles Claibourne, right?”

The man just kept smiling.

“You were Patient Alpha, too. Weren’t you?” Steve tried to read his reaction. Nothing. “You know, Dr. Ludovich? Luh-DAW-witch? While you were at Stanford? Ring any bells?”

Claibourne winked. “Somebody’s been doing their homework.”

Steve leaned in. “And you’re him right now, aren’t you? Patient Alpha?”

“Busted! You got me, copper! I am he, I am Patient Alpha. In fact, I am Patient Alpha *and* Patient Omega.” Claibourne leaned back and laughed.

Steve didn’t remember any Patient Omega from the study.

Claibourne looked squarely at him. “But you knew that already. You didn’t have to ask me that. You want to ask me something else. That’s why you came after me.”

“No, I . . . I—”

“I-I-I . . . You don’t know what I’m talking about.” Claibourne placed his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “You’re so exquisite, you know that, Steve? So very intricate. You long for connection, to make contact, and yet you’re so afraid, so petrified, of what might happen. Like those young mothers in the café the other day.”

“Huh?” Claibourne couldn’t possibly know about that.

“Sure, the two young mothers with the Paris-Dakar strollers. Remember that little observation? How the strollers were so tricked out with cables and brakes and knobby tires, you joked that they looked better suited for a road rally? Remember?”

Nausea. Lightheadedness. The hallway contracted around Steve. He felt like he might float into the air at any moment. Where was everybody? Was this a dream? Everything was cloudy, blurred around the edges.

“Those young moms in their Lycra got to you, really ignited your longing.”

“No, it’s not like that.”

“You’re ashamed because you think it’s sexual, some animalistic desire. But you’re wrong. No, it’s because you long for that life. Wife, children, coffee with a friend in the afternoon. Connection! Yet you feared them so much you needed to mock them. Have you wondered why?”

Steve jerked himself backwards, breaking free of Claibourne’s grasp. He shook his head, trying to dissipate the clouds.

“What are you doing to me? Where is everybody?”

Claibourne scanned the hallway. “Nobody here but us chickens, Steve.”

“I don’t feel so well. How do you know so much about me? It’s impossible.”

“Aesthetically speaking, it’s beautiful how you’ve crafted the life of Steve Nogueira. You’ve done wonderful things with it. The intricate narrative, the interplay and tension between longing and self-isolation, the way the desire to look within has been reversed, redirected into probing the lives of others, while the life of Steve Nogueira is left on the shelf, unexplored. A genuine masterpiece.”

“This is crazy.”

“Maybe.” Claibourne winked and leaned in. “Hey, want to see something really cool?”

“Just tell me, what is all this?”

“Aw, come on. I promise you, it’s gonna be really, really cool. I swear.”

“I don’t know.”

“Open your mind and close your eyes, and I’ll give you a great big surprise.”

Steve closed his eyes, then opened them quickly. “Is this gonna hurt?”

“Hell, no!”

Steve closed his eyes and Claibourne began singing:

Come on, come on, come on, come on, and touch me, babe!

KAPOW.

Claibourne smacked Steve squarely in the forehead. Steve couldn’t believe it. He reached out blindly and grabbed onto the man in front of him, with a mind to smack him right back, but when he opened his eyes, he was shocked to discover that he had grabbed onto himself.

That is, the man standing before him was. . . himself. Steve Nogueira. He released his grip and looked down to see a blue, untucked dress shirt. Steve had become Claibourne. The linoleum was cold and smooth beneath his bare feet.

Steve stared back into his own eyes. Claibourne was in there; Steve could see him.

Claibourne nodded. “Take it easy there, bucko. Let’s just relax. That’s right. Listen, it’s just like a costume. Sometimes it takes a minute to get into

character.”

Steve relaxed. A sudden flood of emotions overtook him.

My father is dead. My father is dead. Everything is dying around me. I've destroyed the company built by my father and his father and his father before him.

Steve stood in an expansive corner office, blonde wood paneling everywhere and a giant ficus behind the desk, as if the office belonged to the tree. Failure churned in his stomach like broken glass.

I have lost everything. Everything.

Then, radiating from the bottom of everything, the presence of something else. Something comforting, like a patch of sunlight.

I am free. I am free. He is dead and I am free.

That presence disappeared beneath fresh waves of loss and despair, and all was grief and failure again.

The company is gone. All the clients are fleeing. We'll never be able to recover.

Then the waves recede, and the sensation of freedom, buoyant and stronger this time. Relief. The slipping away of a tremendous weight, as if he'd been buried in the sand, and was slowly wrestling his way free, pressing upward.

“Okay.” Claibourne embraced him. “That's enough for now, I think.”

Steve nodded. He didn't want to be Charles Claibourne anymore.

“But first, let me ask you something.” The other man grabbed his chin and made him look again into his own eyes. “Who are you?”

“Huh?”

“Who are you? Who is the I who is Steve Nogueira one minute and Charles Claibourne the next?”

“I . . . I—”

“I-I-I.” Claibourne copied. “Yes! By George, I think he's got it!”

Steve closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the stainless steel frame around the elevator doors. The metal was cold and bracing. The dizziness subsided. He felt solid again, but he was panting, as if he'd just run a great distance. He took a deep breath and counted down from ten.

Then Simon was there, shaking him.

“Steven! For Christ’s sake, wake up! You don’t want Mrs. Walker to catch you napping on your feet.”

“Huh?” Steve blinked. The corridor was busy with nurses and aides and forlorn visitors. He looked down to see his own hands. Everything was back to normal.

“What’s the matter with you? Can’t handle a double -shift anymore?”

“Where’s Claibourne?”

Simon shrugged. “Who?”

“The son of the rich guy who died.”

“Never mind him. They’re waiting on the oxygen. Room 317, remember?”

Steve scanned the hallway, saw a flash of blue dress shirt at the far end.

“Cover for me.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Steve wanted to scream at Simon. But instead, only quiet words came out of his mouth. “Simon, I know we haven’t always gotten along. If I’ve ever done anything to offend you, or if I’ve shown you any kind of attitude, I apologize. I’m truly very sorry. I know I’ve been a real asshole in the past, and I hope you can forgive me.”

Simon stared, wide-eyed.

“I know it’s asking a lot, but please, could you just cover for me this one time?”

Simon nodded. “Sure, of course.”

“Thanks, buddy!” Steve turned and ran after Claibourne.

Chapter 49

The coffee cups were cold and empty, the dessert plates long since cleared from the table. The miniature leather portfolio stood in the middle of the table, the white check protruding like a shirt cuff from a tuxedo sleeve. The waiter passed by every ninety seconds or so, just in case someone had produced cash or a credit card.

Tommy looked around. The dinner rush was picking up; they needed the table.

“Anyway,” Burt said. “The club has a lovely chapel they built special for weddings, with the altar right in front of these huge windows overlooking the water hazard on the ninth hole.”

“It’s lovely,” Stephanie, Tommy’s future mother-in-law, added. She used her hands a lot when she talked, as if sculpting invisible clay. “Absolutely lovely. You know how the Berkshires are, all the trees and rolling hills. Lush, not dry and scrubby like out here.”

“And of course,” Burt continued. “The club house is the ideal perfect place for the reception. Avoid all that chaos after the ceremony. Everyone asking for directions and getting lost. Who needs it?”

Tommy liked Burt, despite his burly it-ain’t-over-til-it’s-over refusal to take no for an answer. He reminded Tommy of the die-hard Giants fans who had kept pushing for a downtown stadium, year after year, defeated ballot measure after defeated ballot measure.

Tommy also liked him because of what Carlotta had told him. How Burt had come into their lives a couple of years after her father’s death. How he took Stephanie and the girls to the circus and ball games and Cape Cod every summer. Tommy got the impression that Carlotta’s father hadn’t been very present, working long hours and traveling often for business.

One time, early in their relationship, Tommy quipped that if the man hadn’t been around so much when he was alive, being dead couldn’t have made much difference. He wasn’t thinking when he said it. Carlotta didn’t talk to him for days, and he hated himself for being so stupid and insensitive. It wasn’t the first

time Tommy had said something that hurt a woman's feelings, but it was the first time he'd felt truly sorry.

"They can seat hundreds of people. And the food!" Stephanie closed her eyes and looked as if she might swoon. "Maggie Delvecchio was married there last summer and you wouldn't believe the salmon!"

"Ma. . ." That was the extent of Carlotta's rebuttal.

Burt tapped Tommy on the knee. "Tommy, you're from the East Coast. New York? Westchester? Am I right? Am I right?"

"Yes, sir, I—"

"Call me Burt, please. We're gonna be family." He winked. "Anyway, wouldn't it be easier for your family, your childhood friends, if you got married closer to home? I mean, let's face it, Massachusetts is a hell of a lot closer than San Francisco. Am I right?"

"Burt—" Carlotta asserted.

"I'm just saying it would be more convenient for everyone involved."

Burt's arguments made a lot of sense. Except, of course, that most of Tommy's childhood friends had fled Westchester as soon as they could, scattering like thieves after a big heist.

"Listen to him, sweetie. We only want what's best." Stephanie smiled at Tommy. "I think Tommy understands. Don't you, Tommy?"

Tommy cleared his throat. "Um, well, I think Burt has an interesting point—"

Carlotta gripped his thigh and dug her nails in.

". . . but we really have our hearts set on a small wedding. You know, low key and local."

Carlotta jumped in. "With a view of the ocean."

Stephanie sighed. "Honey, that's such a. . . I don't know, hippie thing to do, don't you think? I know this is California, but it's 1998, after all."

Tommy watched Carlotta's jaw stiffen, jutting out in a slow, deep inhalation, which in his experience was akin to the Big Bad Wolf getting ready to huff and puff and blow someone's house down. But Stephanie's house was not only made of brick but reinforced with steel rebar and retrofitted to withstand an 8.2 quake. Tommy had witnessed a similar blowup on the trip back East for her grandmother's funeral and it wasn't pretty. Carlotta was wiped for days after their return to San Francisco.

“I mean, really, don’t you want a grown-up wedding?”

Tommy could do nothing but pray for divine intervention.

And it came!

The loud hum of a vibrating cell phone reverberated around their table. They all shared is-that-your-phone-or-mine glances, and of course it was Tommy’s.

He fished the blessed thing out of his pocket. “Sorry, sorry.” He saw it was Johnny and pressed Ignore. “I’ll call him back.”

Carlotta looked at him.

“Johnny,” Tommy explained. He saw Burt reaching for the check, but snatched the check first. “Not this time, Burt. I insist.”

Burt raised his arms in protest. “Come on, Tommy, we invited you. Besides, you two kids are saving up for a house.”

Tommy pulled out his credit card and tucked it into the leather portfolio. “It’s our turn. Besides, Carlotta told you I just got a new job offer. Call this an unofficial celebration.” The words came out of his mouth like thick syrup.

The waiter swooped in and seized the portfolio a split second later.

“I almost forgot,” Tommy said. “I brought a small present for you guys.”

Their faces widened with surprise. Carlotta, too, seemed taken aback. He hadn’t told her about this, the idea having come to him right after his encounter with Carrie at Tassajara.

Tommy pulled the invitation-sized envelope from the pocket of his khakis. It was slightly warped and the corners blunted. He handed it to Burt. “Just a little something to do while you’re up in Napa.”

Stephanie produced reading glasses and watched while Burt opened the envelope. A confused look crossed her face. “A hot air balloon ride?”

Tommy nodded. “With complimentary champagne.”

Burt and Stephanie exchanged glances and smiled. “That’s very thoughtful of you. We’ve always wanted to try that, haven’t we, Burt?”

“Very nice, Tommy. Very nice. Thank you.” He put the gift certificate back in the envelope and handed it to Stephanie, who slipped it into her purse.

Tommy’s phone buzzed again. Carlotta nudged him. “You should answer.”

“Excuse me a second.” Tommy stood up and headed toward the restrooms. “Johnny? Where are you?” Tommy intercepted the waiter on his return with the

credit card, and signed the slip, standing up, phone pinched between ear and shoulder.

“Tommy? Tommy? Can you hear me?”

“Johnny? Please God, tell me you’re not at Claibourne’s house.”

“No, of course not. Why would I be there?”

Tommy sighed in relief.

“Why would I be there when He’s here?”

Shit. “Where’s here? What are you talking about? Where are you right now?”

“At the hospital. You need to get down here or you’re gonna miss everything.”

Tommy didn’t know which was worse: stalking Claibourne at his home or at a hospital. This couldn’t possibly end well.

“Okay, Johnny. Take it easy. What hospital? Just tell me, what hospital?”

The line was quiet for a moment. “Uh, lemme see. I don’t know.”

Tommy took a deep breath. “What street are you on? Where are you?”

“Um, not too sure. We’re near the park, that much I know.”

Tommy didn’t understand. “What side of the park? Wait! Are you all right? Are you *at* the hospital or *in* the hospital?”

“You mean, like a patient? I’ve never felt better in my whole life. For the first time, I really feel, I don’t know. . . I really feel. . . Well, you’ll see. You’ll see soon enough.”

“Where near the park? North or south? Come on, Johnny. Get it together.” The hospital had to be either University Medical or St. Mary’s. Both were close to where Tommy had dropped him off only a couple of hours before.

“South, but—”

“Stay right there. I’ll call you when I’m close.” Tommy hung up and headed back to the table. Carlotta and her parents stood up as he approached. “Everything’s taken care of.”

Carlotta’s brow was tight with concern. “Is Johnny all right?”

Stephanie beamed at Tommy. “Carlotta was just telling us about the volunteer work you do with the homeless and I just think it’s wonderful. ‘There but for the grace of God’ and all that.”

“Uh.”

Carlotta hooked her arm in Tommy's. "It's like the Big Brother program, where the volunteers sort of sponsor a specific homeless person and help them integrate back into society. Tommy's been working with this one fellow, a very nice man named Johnny, a Vietnam veteran."

Burt nodded approvingly. "Very good!"

Tommy was impressed with Carlotta's gift for invention. "Yes, well, you know. Look, I hate to rush off, but Johnny's in a bit of a bind. His, uh, brother is in the hospital and Johnny needs a ride. It's way across town and you know, he's homeless. It's hard to get a cab."

"Of course." Stephanie took Carlotta's hand. "Honey, why don't you let us take you home while Tommy helps his friend?"

Burt's face tightened and Tommy understood why. In ten minutes, they could be across the Golden Gate Bridge and an hour away from their hotel in St. Helena. Running Carlotta back to the Mission would add at least fifty minutes to their trip.

Carlotta shook her head. "That's okay, Mom, but I'm going with Tommy. Johnny's my friend, too."

That made Tommy feel good.

Tommy and Carlotta walked her parents back to their rented sedan. Burt crushed Tommy's hand in one last handshake and pulled him in close. "This wedding business isn't over, you hear me? You hear me?"

Tommy smiled through the pain. "I hear you, Burt. I hear you."

They waved good-bye and hurried to the Jetta.

As Tommy pulled into traffic, Carlotta said, "You never took me on a hot air balloon ride."

"Sweetie, every day with you is a hot air balloon ride."

Chapter 50

A hospital room is an awkward place to hold a vigil.

As Marta had instructed, Lupe brought a black shawl and votive candles from the house, and picked up flowers on the way. After Dr. Burundi officially pronounced Lazlo dead, Marta took him aside and explained that they wished to stand vigil with their dead one, as was their tradition. She told him that this was something they would normally do at home, but Isabel wouldn't be discharged for another couple of days.

The doctor nodded and bowed his head. "Don't worry, I understand."

Marta suspected the man was a Hindu and perhaps more at ease with death and its rituals than other doctors, including Dr. Spungen, for whom death was an implacable foe.

"I'll give you as much time as I can," he continued. "But you must understand that the hospital is bound by certain regulations."

"Of course. Thank you, Doctor."

Marta unfolded the black shawl and covered the surface of the narrow table that slid over the bed. She took Lazlo from Isabel's arms and laid his naked body upon the makeshift bier. He was so small! Lupe took a blouse from Isabel's bag, rolled it up, and slid it beneath the shawl, tucking it under Lazlo's head. They extended his limbs until he was lying straight, like a tiny old man taking a nap.

Lupe had forgotten the handkerchiefs, so Mama cut up one of the hospital towels and moistened the pieces in the bathroom sink.

Together, they washed Lazlo's body with gentle strokes. Lupe's boys, Gustavo and Jorge, climbed up on the bed to watch and help.

Lupe ran a finger along Lazlo's nose. "He looks just like Papa."

Marta nodded. She'd just been thinking the same thing.

Mama said nothing. She fetched a dry towel and patted the body dry. Marta helped her drape the shawl over Lazlo's legs and stomach, smoothing out the wrinkles and folds with great care. Lupe and Mama placed votive candles at each corner of the table.

“Isabel, light the candles.”

Isabel didn’t respond. Marta gently rubbed her shoulder. “It’s okay. You can do it. Lupe, give her the matches.”

Isabel shook her head, tears washing her cheeks. “It’s not that. It’s Diego. He’ll never see his son. He’ll never have a son.” She struck a match and lit the candles. Sulfur bit the air.

“Marta, the lights,” Mama said.

Marta went to the door and flicked the switch; the room was now lit only by the candles and the soft light thrown from the monitors. They arranged the flowers around Lazlo, the white petals thick and fleshy against the black cloth.

The women circled Lazlo, their faces illuminated by the candles. Lazlo’s appearance was already changing, shrinking and growing darker.

“What do you think he would’ve been like?”

“Tall and strong.”

Marta sighed. At least Lazlo had been able to die in his mother’s arms, surrounded by the people who loved him. They were his family and they each had had a chance to hold him and call him by his name.

Gustavo and Jorge grew antsy, flopping around on the furniture and rolling on the floor. Lupe broke the circle to perch the boys side-by-side in visitor chairs and set them up with Gameboys. She produced juice boxes from a shopping bag.

She took out something else, too, and rejoined the circle. “That should hold them for a little while.” She handed out paper cups and held up a bottle of red wine, half full. Without another word, she pulled the cork with a dull pop and splashed wine into each cup.

“To Lazlo.”

They touched cups and sipped their wine. Mama leaned over Lazlo’s tiny face.

“Mama? What are you doing?” Marta asked.

Mama kissed Lazlo on the lips, then lingered, allowing a bit of wine to trickle from her mouth into his. When she pulled away, red droplets clung to his cheek.

“This is something we do,” Mama said. “So that we are all sharing the same wine.”

Without hesitation, Isabel drank from her cup and leaned over her son, kissing him and dribbling wine into mouth.

Then Lupe did the same.

Marta didn't know what to think. She remembered nothing of this tradition, and now the others were watching her expectantly. She took a small sip of wine, leaned over Lazlo, and kissed him. His lips were small and delicate as rose petals. Marta let some wine seep through, trying not to make a mess.

The candles crackled. Her mother and her sisters smiled at her. She felt a glimmer of understanding that they were, behind everything, one together.

Mama began singing in Spanish, but in a voice so low, Marta couldn't make out the words. Lupe hummed along and the four of them reached out and held hands again, closing the circle around Lazlo. Their faces flickered in the candlelight. The low hum of the singing slowed time to a trickle.

Isabel was the first to break the circle.

"I'm sorry, I need to lie down."

Lupe helped her get back into bed, arranging the pillows and pulling up the covers. Isabel closed her eyes and sank into the pillow.

Marta checked Lazlo, dabbing a drop of wine from his lips. She stroked his cheek. He looked different somehow, brighter than before. Marta wondered if the candles were burning more brightly.

The door burst open, flooding the room with sterile white light from the corridor. Shielding her eyes, Marta saw a man standing there in the doorway, silhouetted against the sudden glare. The room lights came on and *Madre di Dios*, it was Mr. Claibourne, his shirt tails hanging loose and a wild look in his eyes.

Chapter 51

“Why doesn’t he answer his fricking phone?”

Tommy cruised past the Emergency Room entrance first. Carlotta had her window rolled down, her head stuck out like the engineer on a locomotive.

“Do you see him? I don’t see him.” Tommy prayed he hadn’t gone inside.

“Keep going, maybe he’s around the side.”

Tommy circled the block. Carlotta spotted him first, standing at the bottom of some steps outside a corner entrance. Aside from a few exiled smokers, he was alone. Tommy pulled over into the only place open, next to a fire hydrant.

He leaned toward Carlotta. “Let’s just get him in the car and get out of here.”

“Right. We’ll figure out the rest later.”

Tommy jumped out of the car. “Johnny, hey!”

“Tommy, you made it! Yes!”

“Of course. But come on, we should get out of here. You don’t want to be here.”
Tommy jerked his thumb toward the car. “Look, Carlotta’s here, too.”

On cue, Carlotta leaned out the window. “Hey, Johnny! Come on, let’s go get some coffee. How about some coffee, huh?”

Johnny stared at them, perplexed. “What are you guys talking about? The party’s just getting started.” His eyes darted over Tommy’s shoulder. “Sabrina!”

Sabrina ran up to them. She threw her arms around Johnny and kissed his cheek.
“Hey, you! Did I miss anything yet?”

“No, no. You’re right on time.” Johnny put his arm around Tommy. “You remember Tommy from the other night, right?”

Sabrina surprised Tommy with a quick hug and peck on the cheek. “Of course!
I’m so glad you decided to come.”

Johnny pointed to the car. “And that lovely lady there is his fiancée, Carlotta.”

Sabrina waved, her arm wagging like a dog’s tail. “Hey!”

Carlotta smiled nervously and waved back.

“Come on, Carlotta!” Johnny shouted. “What are you waiting in the car for? Get out here and join us.”

Carlotta looked to Tommy for a clue. He could only shrug. While Johnny was distracted with Carlotta, Tommy turned to Sabrina.

“Sabrina, look, we need to get Johnny out of here. He’s been stalking this guy, he followed him here, and—”

She cut him off. “I know! Me too!”

Tommy thought she meant that she’d come to get Johnny out of there, too. “Great, so if we can just get him into my car, see, we can. . . Uh, do you need a ride anywhere? We can drop you someplace.”

Sabrina laughed and batted Tommy playfully with her iridescent fish purse. “Silly, this is where we’re supposed to be. Don’t you know?” She turned to Johnny. “I thought he knew. I mean, after the park and all.”

“He’s coming around. Slowly. Takes some folks more time.”

Carlotta hooked her arm in Tommy’s. “Is that the woman from the park the other night? Where are her crutches?”

“I don’t know. Johnny, what’s she talking about?”

Sabrina’s face widened with disbelief. “Tommy, you were there. He called your name. Don’t you remember? Just before He made me whole again?”

Carlotta’s grip on his arm tightened. “Tommy, what’s going on?”

Nausea and dizziness swept over Tommy, the same feeling he got as a kid when the Ferris wheel went too fast. “I have to sit down.”

“Oh come on! You remember.” Sabrina began clapping her hands. “Can I get a witness? Can I get a witness? Oh yeah!” She stopped and stared hard into his eyes. “You remember.”

Tommy walked over to the bushes and ejected his Perry’s dinner deep into the branches.

He remembered.

Gentle hands stroked his back and shoulders. Someone handed him a small bottle of water. He washed out his mouth and spit into the bushes.

He remembered.

Tommy sat on the steps and drained the bottle, feeling better with each swallow.

Carlotta sat down, hugging him sideways. “Honey, are you okay? I think that’s the first time I’ve ever seen you get sick.”

Tommy leaned into her warmth. She was always so warm to the touch. “I’m better now. Remember last night, when I told you I thought I left something out, about the park? That was it, the part where he called my name.”

“What do you mean, he called your name?” She turned to Sabrina and Johnny.
“What is he talking about?”

Sabrina shrugged. “Isn’t it exciting? To be here, now, at this precise moment?”

Carlotta reached out and grabbed Johnny’s hand. “Johnny, come on. Tell me. You know something but you won’t tell me.”

A new voice boomed in. “Johnny’s afraid to tell you. He doesn’t want to scare Tommy away. And besides, Johnny doesn’t know why He is calling Tommy.”

Everyone turned to see who was talking. Tommy recognized the voice, but when he saw her, he almost didn’t recognize her.

Greta Gdansk appeared from behind Johnny, garbed not in her rainbow regalia but an ankle-length dress beneath a robe, a flowing combination of non-descript tan and sandy hues, the ad hoc habit of a desert nun. Even her kerchief covering her head was creamy white. But there was no mistaking her sharp Viking features, the icy blue spark in her eyes.

She shrugged. “Well, don’t look at me. I don’t have any idea, either.”

The squeal of tires caught everyone’s attention. A police cruiser had pulled up behind Tommy’s Jetta. Tommy remembered the fire hydrant and swore under his breath.

He felt only a mixed sense of relief when the door opened and Sergeant Guardino stepped out.

Chapter 52

Nurse Steve did his best to keep up, but Claibourne kept slipping away, shooting around corners, cutting through wards, disappearing into random hospital rooms, then popping out again. Soon Steve was not alone; others followed, calling after Claibourne.

“Hey, you! Come back!”

“Help me! Help my mother!”

“Come back! Come back! Come back!”

Claibourne veered into yet another room. This time Steve saw him, and followed him in. He immediately regretted it. Instead of the usual patient watching the news alone or lying like a heap among the sheets, there were three women surrounding a very small baby, a preemie, who was stretched out on the overbed table. Another woman, likely the preemie’s mother, lay in the bed.

When he looked closer at the baby, Steve felt worse. He didn’t need the candles and black cloth to figure it out. After seven years as a nurse, he knew a dead baby when he saw one.

“Mr. Claibourne, what are you doing here? I don’t understand,” one of the women said. “How. . . ?”

The oldest of the four—the grandmother?—looked startled and said something in Spanish. The first woman responded and soon all four were talking over one another in staccato bursts. Every other phrase was punctuated with the same word: Claibourne.

Meanwhile, the crowd in the hallway murmured and shouted. They pressed into the doorway, but didn’t enter the room. Steve understood. His own curiosity was checked by the equal and opposite force of his fear, the desire to see countered by the urge to flee.

Claibourne made a goofy face. “I just dropped by to see the baby.”

“But, sir, I. . . Are you all right, Mr. Claibourne? Should I call someone?”

Claibourne ignored her. He saw the child and smiled. “Aw, is this the little guy?”

No one said anything as he strode across the room. He plucked the child off the table and swept away the black cloth and flowers and candles, a shattering of glass and hissing of wax. He held him aloft with both arms and beamed.

“Who’s da widdle baby? Who’s da widdle baby?”

The women clutched each other in shock.

“What a cutie! Gonna be a real heartbreaker someday. Just look at him!”

“Mr. Claibourne! Please! Mr. Claibourne! Stop! What are you doing?”

Claibourne continued as if they were in someone’s living room for an afternoon tea. He drew the child down to his face, his nose poking into the tiny torso. “Wanna widdle motorboat? Huh? Wanna widdle motorboat?” Claibourne pressed in and blew wet raspberries against the child’s belly.

And the child squealed.

The women stopped shrieking.

The crowd in the hall shut up.

A desert silence filled the room.

No, not silence. Steve could hear things. Time had stopped. No, not stopped. Expanded. The moment was crowding out the past and the future until there was room only for the present. Capital-P Present. The room swelled with capital-M Moment like a balloon, like a thing. The only Thing.

Steve thought his head would explode.

Another loud raspberry ripped the silence, another baby squeal. The infant was transformed, no longer shrunken and dark with death, but plump and pink with life.

The squeal was a cracked, Martian croaking. Half puppy, half duck. But Steve knew a baby’s giggle when he heard one. This was impossible. The dreamy sense of unreality surged in again. The pressure in Steve’s head popped and was gone, and he floated, his vision gone blurry around the edges.

Claibourne and the baby. Steve understood. This was what Patient Alpha had been doing in all those hospital rooms. This was why all the people were thronging behind him.

“Oh, yes you do, oh yes you do like that!” Claibourne blew another extended raspberry into the baby’s belly. The child giggled again, but this time the sound staggered and shifted into a full-throated bawl.

Claibourne smiled at the women, his face rubbery with exaggerated chagrin. “Uh oh, looks like somebody’s hungry.” Shifting the baby arm to arm, he pulled off his blue shirt and wrapped it around the child, then carried the blue bundle to the new mother.

She stared blankly at him.

Claibourne set the child onto her stomach, her arms slowly wrapping around her son. Claibourne cleared his throat. “Ladies, a little help, if you don’t mind.”

The other women snapped into action. They loosened the mother’s garments to expose the breast and guided the baby to the nipple. He took a moment to stop crying, but when he latched on, he latched on tightly. The mother’s face tightened, a sudden mask of pain and joy. She wept and smiled, and her weeping became the only sound in the room.

But not for long.

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” Dr. Burundi pressed his way through the throng. “What is going on here?” He straightened his white coat and took in the scene, his eyes finally locking onto the nursing baby. “Who... That isn’t...”

The new mother beamed at him. “Yes, it is he. It is our Lazlo.”

Dr. Burundi walked over to the bed, pulling his stethoscope from his coat pocket. Steve admired the way he first warmed the chest piece by rubbing it against his sleeve. His face tightened with concentration, then softened with wonderment.

“This can’t be the same baby.” Dr. Burundi fingered the plastic band around Lazlo’s ankle, which, as Steve well knew, confirmed that it was indeed the same baby.

Steve joined the doctor by the side of the bed. As they both watched, a thin red trickle ran down the child’s cheek. “Excuse me, ma’am, uh, I think you’re bleeding.”

One of the women rubbed her finger in the red fluid. “No,” she said. “It’s the wine! From before! Look, Marta.”

“Nurse, did you see what happened here?”

“Um, yes, sort of. This man. . .” Steve scanned the room for Claibourne, but of course he was already gone.

Chapter 53

Tommy clambered to his feet as Guardino approached. The cop said something into the radio microphone attached to his shoulder and shook his head.

“Tommy, Johnny, Greta.” He tipped his hat to Sabrina and Carlotta. “I got called in on a disturbance. Nothing to do with you good folks, I hope.”

Tommy raised his hands in surrender. “I honestly don’t know. I have no idea what’s going on anymore.”

“Any of you been running around inside, by any chance?”

They all shook their heads.

Greta put her hand on Guardino’s shoulder. “David, I think you’re supposed to be here. It’s no coincidence you got the call.”

Guardino’s face scrunched in confusion. “Why? What’s going on?”

“It’s Him.” Greta beamed. “He’s inside.”

Guardino shook his head. “That’s great. Just great! Don’t tell me he’s sleepwalking.”

“No, David. He’s awake. Completely and forever. He’s finally awake.”

“Greta, please, just tell me where—” Guardino stopped talking, his gaze freezing over Tommy’s head. Greta looked up too, her face bright with joy.

“It’s Him!” Sabrina shouted.

At the top of the steps stood Charles Claibourne in a white undershirt and tan slacks, the cuffs bunching around his bare feet. Behind him, dozens of people streamed out the exit, holding each other, weeping and laughing, like the survivors of some near-catastrophe.

A businessman, shirtsleeves covered in blood, fell to his knees and kissed Claibourne’s hand. Claibourne smiled like a happy drunk. He stroked the man’s graying head and started down the steps. Still others gathered around, reaching out to touch him, thank him, as he descended.

Tommy couldn’t believe this was the same man he’d confronted hardly seven hours earlier. Claibourne’s face was the same, but transformed. The knitted brow

and tight-set jaw had been replaced by a soft joy. His eyes, no longer set back in burned-out sockets, glimmered brightly like a baby's.

At the bottom of the steps, Claibourne reached down and pulled Johnny to his feet.

Johnny bowed and produced the old satin robe from inside his coat.

Claibourne accepted it with a smile, pulling it on without ceremony. "Yes, that's much better. Thank you, John." He brushed the wrinkles from the sleeve and knotted the belt. "Well, all righty then! I guess we're good to go."

Tommy recognized the Filipino guy standing behind Claibourne: Nurse Steve, the same man who'd scooped up his hundred dollars at the Ground Zero Café. He looked dazed, eyes blank and mouth hanging open.

Tommy reached out and tugged at his scrubs shirt. "Steve! Steve! What happened?"

Steve looked back without recognition. "I don't know. He did something, he healed so many people. All these people."

"All of them?!"

Steve shook his head. "I don't think so. I don't know. He went into some rooms, but not others. And then the baby. . . "

"What baby?"

"The dead one. Only it isn't dead." He blinked. "But it was. I know it was."

"What are you talking about? What baby?" He didn't answer, so Tommy tugged harder and jerked him closer until he was practically in his face. "What baby?"

Steve grabbed Tommy's hand and squeezed hard, shooting white through his knuckles.

"Fuck off!"

Steve slipped away into the crowd.

Tommy turned to Carlotta, whose eyes were fixed on Claibourne, who was embracing Greta. He released her when he saw Tommy. "Thomas! I'm so glad you made it! Is this a great party or what?"

"Um."

"And this must be your lovely fiancée, Carlotta." Claibourne took her hand and kissed it. "Enchanté!"

Carlotta's brow crinkled. "Who are you?"

Claibourne struck a thoughtful pose, scratching his chin. “Who AM I? WHO am I? Who am ‘I’? Who are YOU?” He held up his hands and gestured to the crowd swirling around them. “Who are any of us?”

“No, no, I mean are you some kind of enlightened master or something, like Buddha or Jesus or . . . or what?”

“You want to know if I am God?” Claibourne gripped the lapels of his robe like a Roman senator preparing to orate. “I am He.” He nodded gravely. “Yes, I am He. And you are He. And you are me.”

Johnny chimed in. “And we are all together! Goo goo g’joob!”

“Yes, goo goo g’joob, John.” Claibourne smiled. “Goo goo g’joob, indeed!”

“No, seriously. Seriously!” Tommy’s own voice frightened himself. He was shaking. “Answer her. Are you some kind of prophet or messiah?”

Claibourne leaned toward them, and whispered. “What do you think?”

Say yes. Quickly. The words appeared in Tommy’s head, but it was Carlotta who answered.

“Yes. Quickly!”

Claibourne winked. “Takes one to know one.”

“Huh?”

“I’m rubber, you’re glue. Names bounce off of me and stick onto you.” Claibourne leaned back and crossed his arms. “Do I really need to spell it out for you?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” Tommy shook his head. His vision was getting cloudy around the edges. “What’s going on? What happened with that baby? What am I doing here?”

Claibourne smiled and scratched his belly. “That baby? You think I did anything to that baby? I was just the last straw. The mother, his aunts and grandmother, they were the ones pouring it on. By the time I got there, one tickle was all he needed, and man, he was off and running like a windup car.”

“But how?”

“How?” Claibourne shook his head. “He wants to know how. Let me get this straight. You’re standing on a gigantic rock that’s hurtling through space, a rock that’s tethered by an invisible force across millions of miles to an even more gigantic ball of fire, which is only one of bill-yuns and bill-yuns of such gigantic balls of fire, all of which are suspended in an endless expanse of absolute

nothingness, and never mind the fact that you somehow possess the physical and mental sensibilities to conceptualize all of the above. . . All that, and the one thing that strikes you as mysterious is that a baby might be tickled back to life?"

"I. . . I. . . I. . . "

"Look, if it makes you happy. . . There is no rock flying through space, no gigantic ball of fire. There's no baby, no Charles Claibourne, no Tommy Delacroix."

"No me, no you? Then who's having this conversation?"

"Sorry, pal. We're just sock puppets on God's hands." He held up his hands, fingers pinched together like talking goose heads. "S'Alright? S'Alright! S'Alright? S'Alright! I mean, who's really having a conversation here?"

Carlotta's eyes lit up. "So there is a God?"

"Is there a sock puppet? Are you a sock puppet?"

"But you just said—"

"Never mind what I just said." Claibourne took her hands into his. "This isn't who you really are, just as this isn't who I really am." He swept his arms up and Carlotta mirrored his movements until both of them were looking upward, heads back and arms spread as if embracing the sky. "This is who I really am, who all of us really are."

Tommy didn't get it. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Never mind what I'm talking about." Claibourne faced Tommy. "If I told you God was a banana, and showed you conclusively that God was a banana, would that mean God isn't an apple?"

"Can you try to make some sense, please?"

"If I say I'm God, does that mean John isn't God?" Claibourne swept his arm over everyone and everything. "All this, the people, the trees, the rocks, we are all the same thing, like air or water. All the same, all interconnected. We're not even interconnected, we're just one thing, we're just God."

Tommy reeled. He laughed. This was the Great Pearl, the Key to the Kingdom? This trite New Age crap? Tommy could walk into any used bookstore, flip open any random book from the Goofy Logic section, and find the same loopy philosophy.

"Excuse me, but that hardly sounds original."

Carlotta hugged Tommy from behind. “This is exactly the feeling I talk about when I meditate after yoga!”

“Come on, sweetie. Sock puppets? Bananas?”

Claibourne said, “Look, Thomas, we could be here all night, swapping analogies like a couple of stoned teenagers. Let’s cut to the chase, shall we?”

“And what’s that?”

“Let him who has eyes, see.” Claibourne laid his hands on Tommy’s shoulders, gazed into his eyes, and sang:

*In your eyes
the light the heat
in your eyes
I am complete
in your eyes
I see the doorway*

Then POW! Claibourne head-butted Tommy square in the forehead.

A bright white balloon exploded at the point of impact, widening until it filled Tommy’s entire head, obliterating everything in its path, even Tommy’s name. Warmth spread over him, until :

Chapter 54

You open your eyes.

A ragged veil of fog flows across the night sky like a pink Mississippi River. Clusters of stars appear through the rips and holes, and disappear again. You are standing still. You are flying forward at a tremendous speed. Both.

M-I-S

S-I-S

S-I-P-P-I

The faintest sensation of silk caresses your brow, cool to the touch. The fog, a thousand feet overhead. You feel the fog. You know the fog. You are the fog.

You feel everything around you, you become everything around you. Your nerves no longer end at your skin but shoot outward like laser eyes in every direction, passing into and through everything.

People. Buildings. Trees. Dust.

A few blocks away, cars clog Ninth Avenue because of a double-parked pizza truck. The driver comes down the steps of a Victorian apartment house, the empty red pizza sleeve warm under his arm. He calculates his tip and how much he'll be able to send home to Belo Horizonte at the end of the month.

You are him.

Beneath your feet, the sidewalk and then the gravel and dirt deeper still. Now a tangled layer of pipes, and the water, sewage, and electricity surging through them. Further down, the woolly remains of an ancient and vast root system; it clings to life and waits patiently for the day when it will break through the surface once again.

You feel the cold, damp tendrils as surely as if you had pulled them from the earth with your bare fingers.

You are the roots.

Everywhere your gaze falls, Paradise reveals itself. Everything is perfect as it is, precisely as it is. The sidewalk looks like the same sidewalk, every crack and

weed perfect, exquisitely wrought. The bushes vibrate with a green humming, all the veins and cells knitted together just so. Everything glows, everything hums. Even the coal-like bits of dried dog turd sparkle with a jeweled beauty.

So very beautiful! And here the whole time. How could you have missed it?

Johnny's voice answers from somewhere far away. *Because you are running away. Your work is killing you, Tommy. Every day another shadow falls across your shoulders, and it's only a matter of time before the darkness completely consumes you. Turn around, Tommy. Now that you know, please turn around.*

Yes, of course. Of course! It's so obvious. How could you have not seen it, when you know all these things? When you are all these things?

There is nothing you do not know, nothing you cannot know. You inhale, filling your lungs. Atoms expand, galaxies shrink. Everything swirls together, turbulent as a whitewater canyon. Still as a midnight pond.

You know where you are. This is the Planet, this is the Moment, this is Home.

But who are you?

You are not Tommy. But of course you are Tommy.

I'm not a doctor but I play one on TV.

Who plays Tommy?

I do. I play everyone and everything.

You are Johnny, riding low over the jungle in an open helicopter, toward the ocean. The scenic route, the pilot announces. Below you, a postcard of paradise, white beaches and palm trees with fat fronds, the water blue and clear as a glass marble. In a month, you'll be home to meet your twin sons, not yet a week old. Suddenly, shouting and gunfire. Rockets curl out of the trees like snakes. Smoke pours from the helicopter next to yours. The gunner fires into the jungle. Then the clanging of the rocket inside your cabin and an awful brightness that blots out everything.

You are Marta, standing in front of your husband, a small bulldog of a man. He shouts at you, calls you barren, useless, a waste of flesh and blood. His breath is a spray of stale beer and cheese dip. You want to turn away but you won't give him that. So you lean into the foul wind and take it and take it and take it. His bags are already packed, and if you're just quiet and take it, he will leave forever and you will remain. You tell yourself that over and over. I will remain, I will remain. Until you no longer hear his words. Only after he is gone, after his car pulls away, after you have bolted and chained the door, do you allow yourself to

breathe again. A giant hole opens inside your chest and you curl up on the bed. You stare into the hole, because if don't face it, you'll fall into it. If you fall, you may never find your way out. So you stare and stare, and you remain. You remain.

You are little Charlie Claibourne, four years old, dancing in the swirl of colored lights beneath the vast stained glass window on the landing on the staircase. Everything around you is Beauty and you are Beauty, and you are all one Beauty. *Dance, Charlie, dance!* Your mother and sister and you hold hands and go round and round, faster and faster under the colored lights. You surge with perfect Joy. You become Joy. Your mother sings: *I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.*

Then they are gone and there is only Father. You are standing next to two coffins in a dark hall. Black-clad knots of relatives and friends and politicians and business people—, an excess of cologne and lipstick—, wind past you, muttering soft words. Someone steps on your foot.

Your mother and sister are gone, laughter and dancing and bright colors are gone, and there is only Father, telling you to be serious, to work harder in school. *Focus, Charlie, focus! Get your head out of the clouds and focus!*

The only escape comes at night, when Father is asleep. Only then can you emerge and become again who you really are. You slip out of bed and go back into the swirling energy that is the Real World that is your True Home. The carpet cool and dry against your bare feet, you sneak down to the landing below the great stained glass window, and you dance.

Chapter 55

The touch of Carlotta's hand on his shoulder pulled Tommy back into himself. But not until he'd slipped into her, too, and knew firsthand her fear. Fear for herself and for Tommy. Not just this moment, this insane moment, but always. She was afraid Tommy might hurt her someday, that she was wrong about him.

This was not the Carlotta that anyone knew, not the Carlotta who stormed into business meetings a thousand feet tall and beamingly beautiful. This was not Carlotta the Confident, not Carlotta the Magnificent, but Carlotta the Little Girl, the Carlotta Tommy had glimpsed the night her grandmother died. She'd been crying in the dark when headlights washed through their bedroom, and Tommy saw this Little Girl, but only for a second.

Now Tommy felt the physical ache of the fear she'd lived with her entire life. Fear that she would never find love, that she was unworthy. When her father would get home from work, he had no sweet words for the little daughters that flocked around him like baby chicks. He would push through them to go upstairs to change before dinner.

Tommy's father had been no different. Tommy had the same empty space inside him, and of course! It was so obvious! The empty spaces had exerted their gravitational pull not just across the floor of the wedding reception where they first met, but across the surface of the planet, across the universe. Until they finally came together like two comets locking into each other's orbit.

Beautiful. Magical. Cosmic.

Mundane.

That was just how the universe worked. What's more commonplace than simple gravity?

Carlotta stroked his back. "Tommy? Sweetie?"

"Yes." Tommy became aware of his breathing. Short, spasmodic. His face was wet. Had he been crying?

He reached for her.

"We don't have to be afraid anymore."

Carlotta's response surprised him. "I know."

"I mean it. We really don't have to be afraid anymore."

"I know, I was with you."

"What?"

"I was with you, wherever it was we went. Claibourne touched my forehead and I was flying with you."

Tommy took her face in his hands and kissed her. "Then you know I can't take the job with Sally Mayfield. I can't. You understand, right?"

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I know, I know. That's okay."

"Really?"

"Screw Sally Mayfield." Carlotta shrugged. "I hear she's a real bitch, anyway."

Tommy laughed and she started laughing, too.

"Everything is so different now," Carlotta said. "I'm not really afraid anymore, but I'm scared. That doesn't make sense, does it?"

"No," Tommy said. "I understand. We're different now and we've never been different before."

"I think that's backwards. Before we were different. Now we're normal."

The throng moved away from the steps, following Claibourne and Johnny and Greta as they headed down the hill toward the park.

"Come on!" Tommy jumped to his feet, pulling Carlotta by the hand. She resisted.

"What about the car?"

Tommy shrugged. "Screw the car. It's just a lease."

Carlotta pulled her hand free and crossed her arms. "No, Tommy. That's not the way it works. Or at least, that's more than I'm ready for. You go. I'll take care of the car."

"But—"

She smiled. "You want to go. It's okay. When you come home, you can tell me all about it." A tear tracked down her cheek. "You'd better hurry."

"You're kidding, right? You think you can get rid of me that easily?" Tommy cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted down the hill. "JOHHHHNNNNYYYY!"

Johnny's unmistakable silhouette emerged from the crowd, stepping into the street. "YO!"

"Are we even now?"

"What?"

"Are we EVEN now?"

"Yeah! Yeah! Sure, we're even!"

Tommy had a flash of Johnny drinking coffee in a diner with his twin sons. Grown men as big as their father and with the same star-bright blue eyes. "Say hi to your boys for me!"

"I'll do that! You take care of Carlotta."

"I will!"

Carlotta stood and slipped her arm around Tommy. "Take care, Johnny!"

He waved and disappeared into the throng.

Tommy and Carlotta stood on the now empty corner below the now empty steps. A man in a sweater came out the entrance and lit a cigarette.

Had any of that just happened? They shook their hands heads and walked back to the car.

A parking ticket flapped on the windshield. Guardino, that son of a bitch! But Tommy almost forgave him when he read the message scrawled under Comments.

Welcome to Paradise!

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew O. Dugas lives in San Francisco.



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